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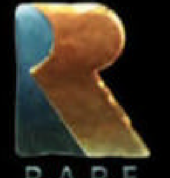

JANUARY 2019
THE XBOX ONE AND XBOX 360 MAGAZINE
XBOX
FICIAL MAGAZINE
GAMEPAD OFFER
SEE PAGE 42
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GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS
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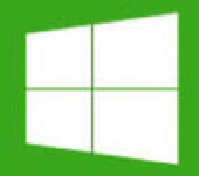
On disc, digital or with Xbox Game Pass



Microsoft Studios







Windows 10



Happy new year!

Our cover game this month is a brand new remake of a very old and very classic game. *Resident Evil 2* was first out in 1998, and we're so excited to see it rebooted for Xbox One with suitable affection for what made the original tick. Turn to page 44 to see what we thought of the remake when we got hands-on with Capcom's survival horror. Meanwhile, it's that time of year when we take a look back over the games that have made the last year one of the best Xbox has ever had as we revisit **OXM**'s Games of 2018! There have been some absolute crackers, with some amazing storytelling. So much so that we decided to investigate just what it takes to pen great videogame narrative, and spoke to some leading writers to find out what's involved in telling stories on Xbox. And as usual we bring you all the news and previews of up-coming games. Enjoy!



Chris Burke
Editor
New year's resolutions: actually finish a game (any game); get better at battle royales; actually take some holiday; sleep more instead of staying up all night playing *Red Dead Online*...

THE OXM TEAM



Adam Bryant
Staff writer
My new year's resolution is to figure out how to get the magazine to write itself so I can finally make a dent into my enormous back catalogue of games.



Warren Brown
Senior art editor
I need to find more time to play and review current gen games, I'm just about ready to move on from the 8-bit era! Oh and on a grown-up note: buy a house!



Russell Lewin
Production editor
Get a pair of reading glasses; go to four new foreign countries; eat at more curry houses this year; get to 13 stone (that may clash with the former); go to Wrexham.



Robin Valentine
Contributor
Finish all my half-completed games from 2018; finish assembling and painting my Warhammer army; make some actual progress in *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

ISSUE 172 JANUARY 2019
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INTERNATIONAL
Official Xbox Magazine is available for licensing. Contact the International department to discuss partnership opportunities
International Licensing Director Matt Ellis
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PRINT SUBSCRIPTIONS & BACK ISSUES
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PRINTED BY
William Gibbons & Sons Ltd on behalf of Future

DISTRIBUTED BY
Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9001

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ISSN 2053689



Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

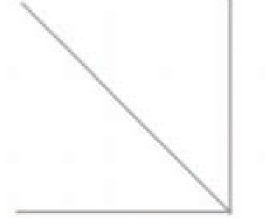
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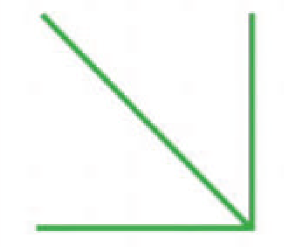
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HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? WHY NOT WRITE TO TEAM OXM AT OXM@FUTURENET.COM

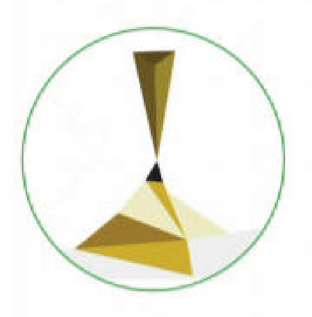
insider



Exciting times in the world of Xbox as Microsoft announces the integration of two new studios, Obsidian and InXile (p8), adding to its ever-growing stable of fantastic game makers. Both are known as RPG focused developers, so we're excited to see what's in store for Xbox in the coming year. It certainly looks like we'll be getting a lot more Xbox exclusives in the future! Elsewhere this month we were busy helping decide on who would be the recipients of a prestigious Golden Joysticks award for 2018's best games. Find out who were this year's winners on p12. We have news for Final Fantasy fans, as Hajime Tabata, the director of *XV,* quits Square Enix to work on his own new project. What will it mean for the series? Find out more on page 14. Finally, we have all the news from the world of Red Dead Online (p18). Rockstar is taking its brilliant Western game to the online masses, hoping to emulate the runaway success of *GTA Online*. The beta launched this month, and we report on what you can find when you get on your horse and head out in a posse for the first time.



008



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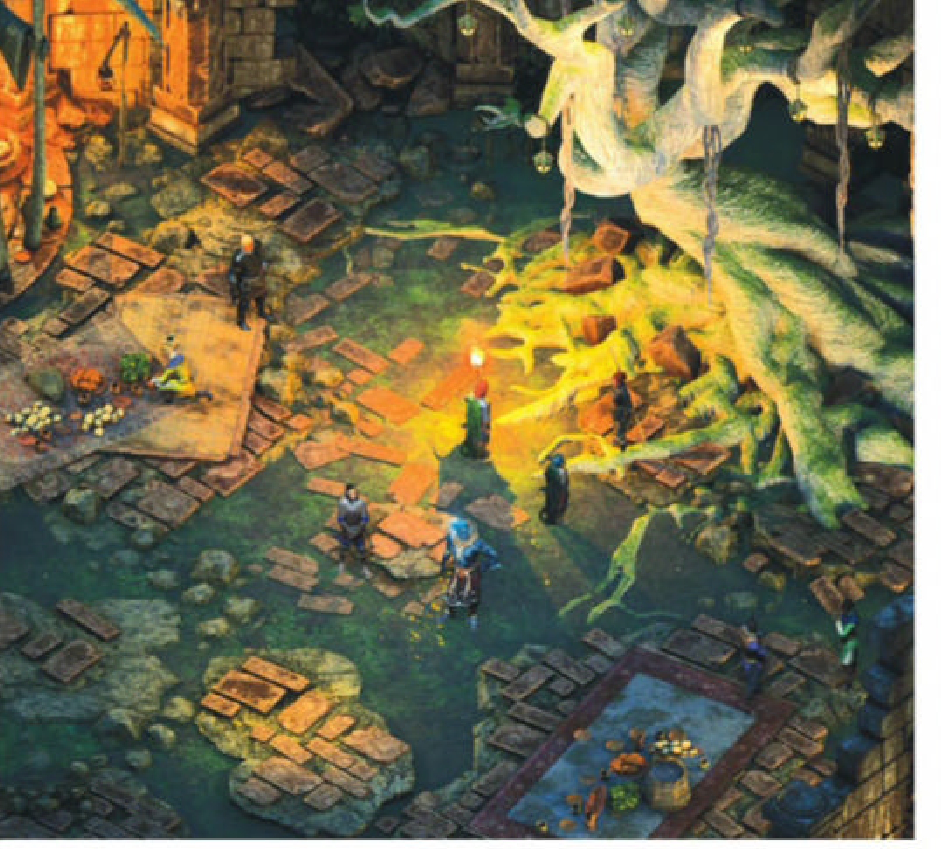


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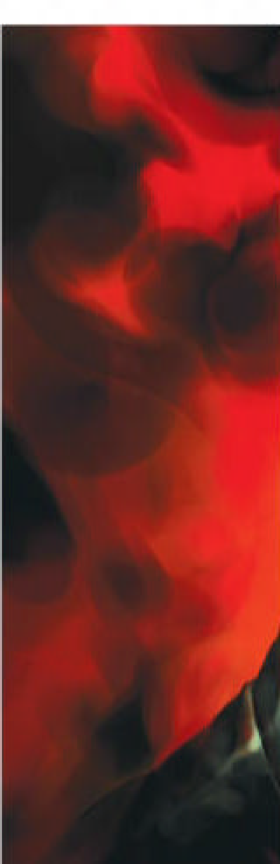




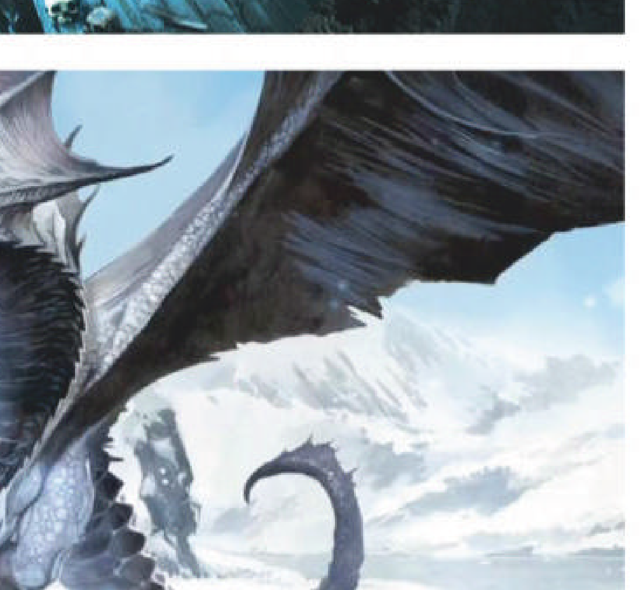





ASSIGNMENTS







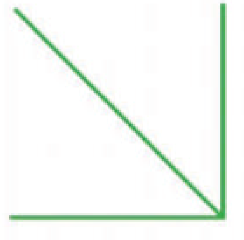






A call to adventure

Microsoft adds veteran RPG developers Obsidian and inXile to its growing stable of studios – but what will they be working on?



At this year's E3, Microsoft used its press conference as a statement of intent. Announcing four developer acquisitions (Playground Games, Ninja Theory, Compulsion Games and Undead Labs) and the formation of new studio The Initiative, it made its message clear: the future is bright, green, and full of Xbox exclusives.

And it looks like that was just the beginning. At the X018 event in November, two more developers officially joined Microsoft – Obsidian and inXile – bringing the total number of internal studios to an impressive 13. Considering that less than a year ago there were only five, it represents a serious shift in priorities, especially coming in the wake of high-profile cancellations such as *Scalebound* and *Fable Legends*.

A big part of the impetus is Xbox Game Pass. The service has been front-and-centre in all of Microsoft Studios' messaging this year, setting it up to be the future of the Xbox ecosystem – and the more exclusives it can boast, the more tempting a subscription will be. But whether you sign up for Game Pass or not, this ramping up of first-party development can only be a good thing, delivering more great AAA games than ever to the best console around.

Speaking at X018 about the future of Xbox, head of Microsoft Studios Matt Booty is as optimistic as you'd expect: "I am just tremendously excited and privileged. It's a great honour to be able to work with such creative teams," he says. "We feel really set up to give our fans new, exclusive games for Xbox, and a great pipeline of things going into Game Pass."

Inter-connected

But what do Obsidian and inXile in particular bring to the equation? Well, they're both RPG specialists – though that's perhaps an understatement…

They each trace their lineage back to a true giant of the genre: Interplay. Founded in 1983, as a publisher and developer it essentially defined the RPG as we now know it. It funded and shepherded to release some of Blizzard and BioWare's earliest games, setting them on the path to become the powerhouses they are today; it put out iconic titles such as *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape: Torment*; and it created the *Fallout* series, now one of the biggest game franchises in the world.

Interplay's reign was ultimately brought to an end by financial troubles beginning in the late '90s, and by 2003 much of its developer talent had left to strike out on their own. Brian Fargo, the company's original founder, departed to form inXile Entertainment; not long after, key members of the internal Black Isle Studios team, who'd worked on many of Interplay's greatest hits including *Fallout*, also left to form Obsidian Entertainment.

Snow worries

Development on inXile's *Wasteland 3* is set to continue as planned, and it's even still releasing on PlayStation 4 (boo, hiss). Another product of crowdfunding, it secured about $1 million less than its predecessor, but still looks promising, moving the post-apocalyptic action to the snowy – and cannibal-infested – mountains of Colorado.



ABOVE Obsidian's *Tyranny* is an intriguing adventure in a world where the evil overlord has already won.

In the years following, Obsidian found itself an unusual but commendable niche: creating critically beloved sequels to games made by other studios. *Knights Of The Old Republic II* brought a subtle moral complexity to the usually black-and-white world of *Star Wars*, *Neverwinter Nights 2* and its substantial expansions told a truly epic tale in the world of *Dungeons & Dragons' Forgotten Realms*, and *Fallout: New Vegas* proved a triumphant return to the setting for the team, an RPG so overflowing with detail and player choice that many still hail it as the best entry in the series.

More recently, the studio turned its hand to comedy with the acclaimed *South Park: The Stick Of Truth*, and ushered in a crowdfunded revival of the old-school isometric RPG genre they helped create in the '90s, raising nearly $4 million to create *Pillars Of Eternity* (at the time the most highly-funded Kickstarter ever for a videogame project) and even more for sequel *Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire*.

"It allows us to tap into the incredible Microsoft eco-system"

Bard times

For its first decade, inXile's history was less prestigious – though its first title was a charming reboot of Interplay's ground-breaking *The Bard's Tale*, after that it focused on mobile puzzle games, and questionable fantasy action game *Hunted: The Demon's Forge*. In 2012, however, it too used crowdfunding to bring the past back into the present, successfully resurrecting the *Wasteland* series (Interplay's post-apocalyptic forerunner to *Fallout*) and creating a spiritual successor to *Planescape: Torment* with *Torment: Tides Of Numenera* – games that proved that they've still got RPG expertise to spare.

Neither studio has had it easy in recent years, however. In a video announcing inXile's acquisition, founder Brian Fargo talks about "the tenuous nature of survival for mid-size games companies such as ourselves"; Chris Parker, COO of Obsidian, reveals in another video that "it's becoming harder and harder for us to make the games that we want to make".

For both studios, joining Microsoft means access to greater resources and support, and more security in their place in the industry. Parker goes so far as to say that, "Finding a partner like Microsoft ... is absolutely critical for us right now if we want to continue doing what we want to do."

And the result should be bigger and better games. "It allows us to tap

OXM SAYS



Chris Burke

Microsoft continuing to bring more developers under its wing has got to be a brilliant thing for Xbox gamers. Alongside Playground Games, Ninja Theory, Undead Labs and Compulsion, it surely means more Xbox exclusives coming our way.



Robin Valentine

These guys are some of the best storytellers in the business, and I love that Microsoft appreciates that. While the old-school revival has been a blast, I'm excited to see both of these studios working on some more modern projects.



Adam Bryant

This is such great news for fans of RPGs, myself included. Add these acquisitions to the others that Microsoft has already made and it sets Xbox up beautifully for the next generation. I'm excited for some brand new franchises.

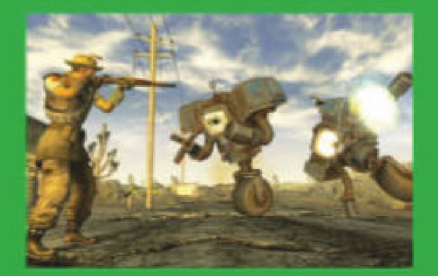
THE BEST QUESTS

Just a handful of our favourite Obsidian and inXile games



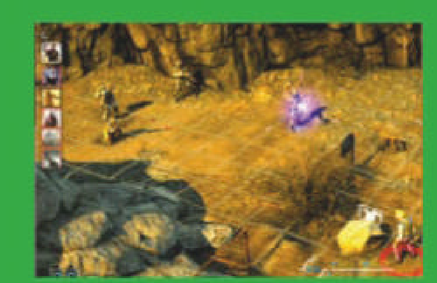
STAR WARS KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

Unwieldy title aside, this is one of the best *Star Wars* games there's ever been, finding a rich seam of story in the space between the light and dark sides of the Force.



FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

You can tell Obsidian's Black Isle veterans relished having *Fallout* back in their hands, investing their Mojave wasteland with a uniquely quirky charm and an incredible sense of player freedom.



WASTELAND 2

It can't have been easy making an RPG in 2014 that feels like a true sequel to a 1988 game, but inXile balanced old and new with style. And how can you not love being able to put skill points into 'Toaster Repair'?



TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA

This spiritual successor has big shoes to fill – the original *Planescape: Torment* is a classic – but impresses with its bizarre setting, unique combat and thoughtfully philosophical dialogue.

into the incredible Microsoft eco-system, that is second-to-none in the development world, with help in areas like QA, localisation, new technology and dedicated focus groups," explains Fargo. "The bottom line is that we're going to be able to make games that we would have never been able to make otherwise."

Culture shock

It's natural, though, for dedicated fans to worry that, in joining a larger whole, these studios will lose something of their identity and niche appeal. Everyone involved is more than keen to dispel these worries, however.

"We really want to stress we're going to keep them unique and preserve the culture that they've got," says Booty; Fargo too explains: "Microsoft wants to work with us because of who we are. They want us to keep doing what we're doing." And Parker confirms the same for Obsidian: "We absolutely have to keep things as they are, and that's always been something that Microsoft has been 100% supportive of."

However – we must admit to finding it unlikely that Microsoft bought up these teams because it wants to get more isometric RPGs on Xbox. More plausible, we reckon, is that it's thinking a little bigger and more forward-looking. Role-playing mechanics are more mainstream than ever – just look at the *Assassin's Creed* series' transition from pure action to a world of stats, levels and decision-making – and we wouldn't be surprised to see either or both of these newly-acquired studios put to work on a AAA open-world role-playing game.

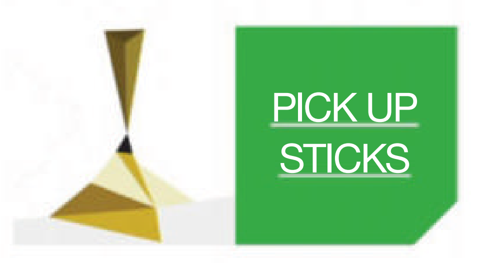
Obsidian especially seems more than ready to take on such a task – in fact, Microsoft contracted them to do almost exactly that in the run up to the Xbox One's launch, funding production of a huge multiplayer RPG called *Stormlands* that unfortunately proved too ambitious to be completed. Could a similar (but hopefully more successful) project be on the books?

Whatever the outcome, we predict only good news for Xbox owners. Expect rich stories, memorable characters, and deep settings from some of the best developers in the business, all exclusively on your console.



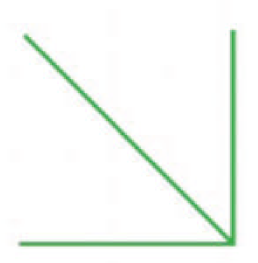
RIGHT inXile's most recent release is *The Bard's Tale IV: Barrows Deep*, a sequel to the original games, unconnected to the 2004 reboot.

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Worth their weight in gold

Forza Horizon 4 and Fornite Battle Royale win big at the Golden Joystick Awards 2018



While OXM's own end-of-year awards are, of course, the most definitive around **(see p62)****, we're always interested to see which games win big at the Golden Joysticks – because they're chosen not by a judging panel, but by the votes of you, the gaming public. Presented once again by comedian and writer Danny Wallace, with voice actress Alix Wilton Regan (Aya in *Assassin's Creed Origins*) on announcer duties, this year's event was packed with luminaries from across the games industry, all assembled to find out your favourite games of 2018.**

Unsurprisingly, the phenomenon that is *Fortnite: Battle Royale* took home its share of accolades, its huge fanbase propelling it to victory in both the Best Competitive Game category and the grand prize, Ultimate Game Of The Year. *Forza Horizon 4*, meanwhile, took home Best Xbox One Game, beating *Sea Of Thieves*, *State Of Decay 2* and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* to the top spot.

Tanks again

Cyberpunk 2077 confidently won Most Wanted Game – no great surprise, given the fervour around CD Projekt's latest – and *World Of Tanks* won the Still Playing Award for the second year running, its devoted fanbase once again swatting away the likes of *Hearthstone*, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and *Destiny 2*. Team shooter *Overwatch* similarly pulled off another year as the winner of the eSports Game Of The Year category.

Best Indie Game went to roguelike mega-hit *Dead Cells*, despite stiff competition from *Celeste* and *Into The Breach*, and the hugely successful *Monster Hunter: World* won Best Cooperative Game for its epic team dinosaur hunts.

"Red Dead Redemption 2 didn't make the splash you might have expected"

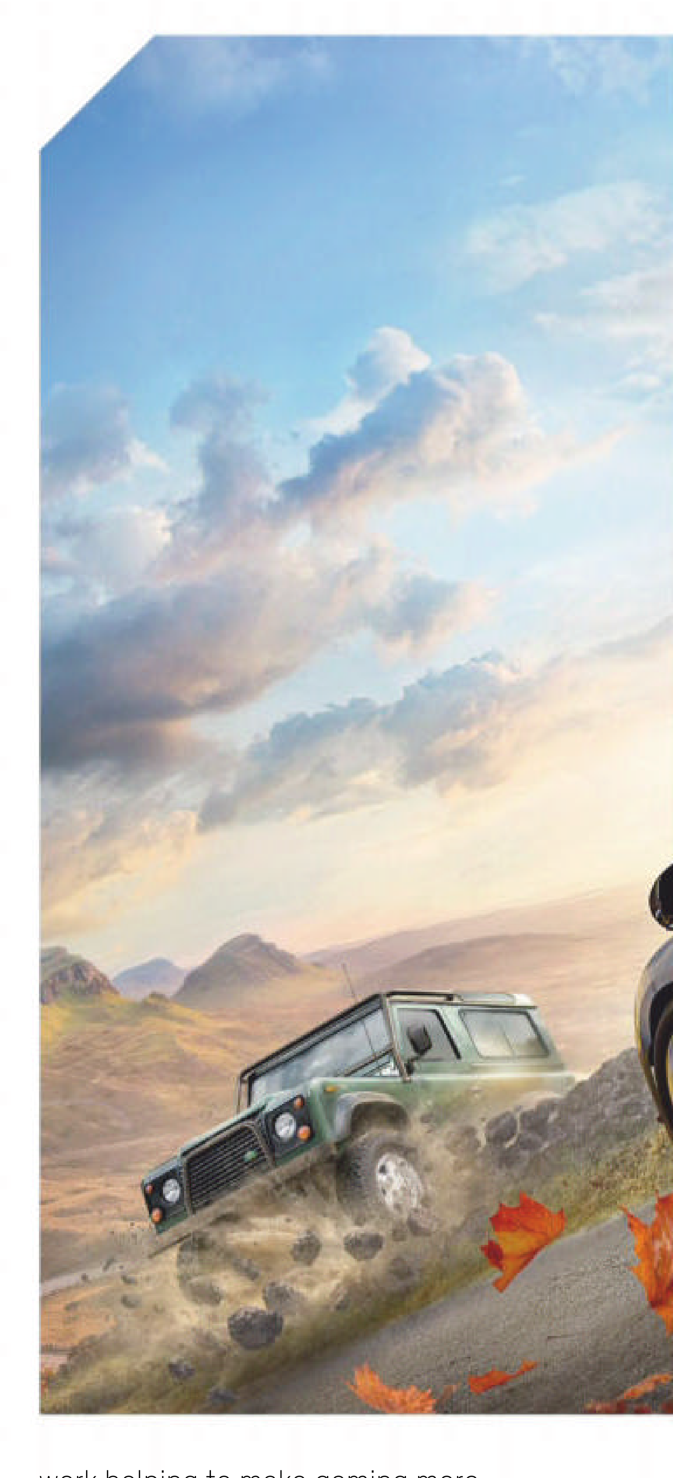
With a release date inconveniently close to the close of the voting period, *Red Dead Redemption 2* didn't make the splash you might have expected. It did at least win Critics' Choice, the award decided by a panel of expert reviewers (including OXM editor Chris).

We sung the praises earlier this year of Microsoft's new Xbox Adaptive Controller, and the Golden Joysticks saw fit to celebrate it too – it won the Outstanding Achievement Award, recognising the team's amazing work helping to make gaming more accessible for all. Also honoured was From Software's Hidetaka Miyazaki, the man behind the *Dark Souls* series and the upcoming *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, who received the Lifetime Achievement Award. He seemed genuinely humbled to have the award presented to him by two of his greatest influences – Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, creators of the *Fighting Fantasy* game books.

"To receive such a prestigious award fills me with great surprise and a sense of great honour. I am tremendously grateful to everyone who has played, enjoyed and appreciated our games," said Miyazaki in his acceptance speech, via a translator. "This award goes to the many people who have built these games with me, and shared their passion with me over the years."

Late to the party

The cut off for eligibility in the Golden Joysticks is November, so recent releases such as *Fallout 76*, *Hitman 2* and *Just Cause 4* will get their shot at an award at next year's event. This is to ensure there's enough time for the public to play and vote for each category. This also means games from late last year were potentially in the running this year – though in the end, none were nominated.



ABOVE We gave *Forza Horizon 4* a 10/10 back in issue 170 – so, yes, it really is that good

RIGHT *Fortnite* is actually still in beta, but it was ruled to be eligible for nominations this year.

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PLAY/EJECT

THE THINGS PUSHING OUR BUTTON (OR NOT)



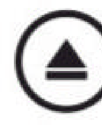
Back from the dead
Skybound has begun work finishing *The Walking Dead: The Final Season*, following the collapse of Telltale earlier this year.



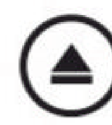
Save point
Fortnite's Save The World mode has received a major update, aimed at making it friendlier and more accessible for new players.



Coming soon
Microsoft will have "a lot to share" at E3 2019 according to head of Xbox Phil Spencer, tweeting after Sony dropped out of the event.



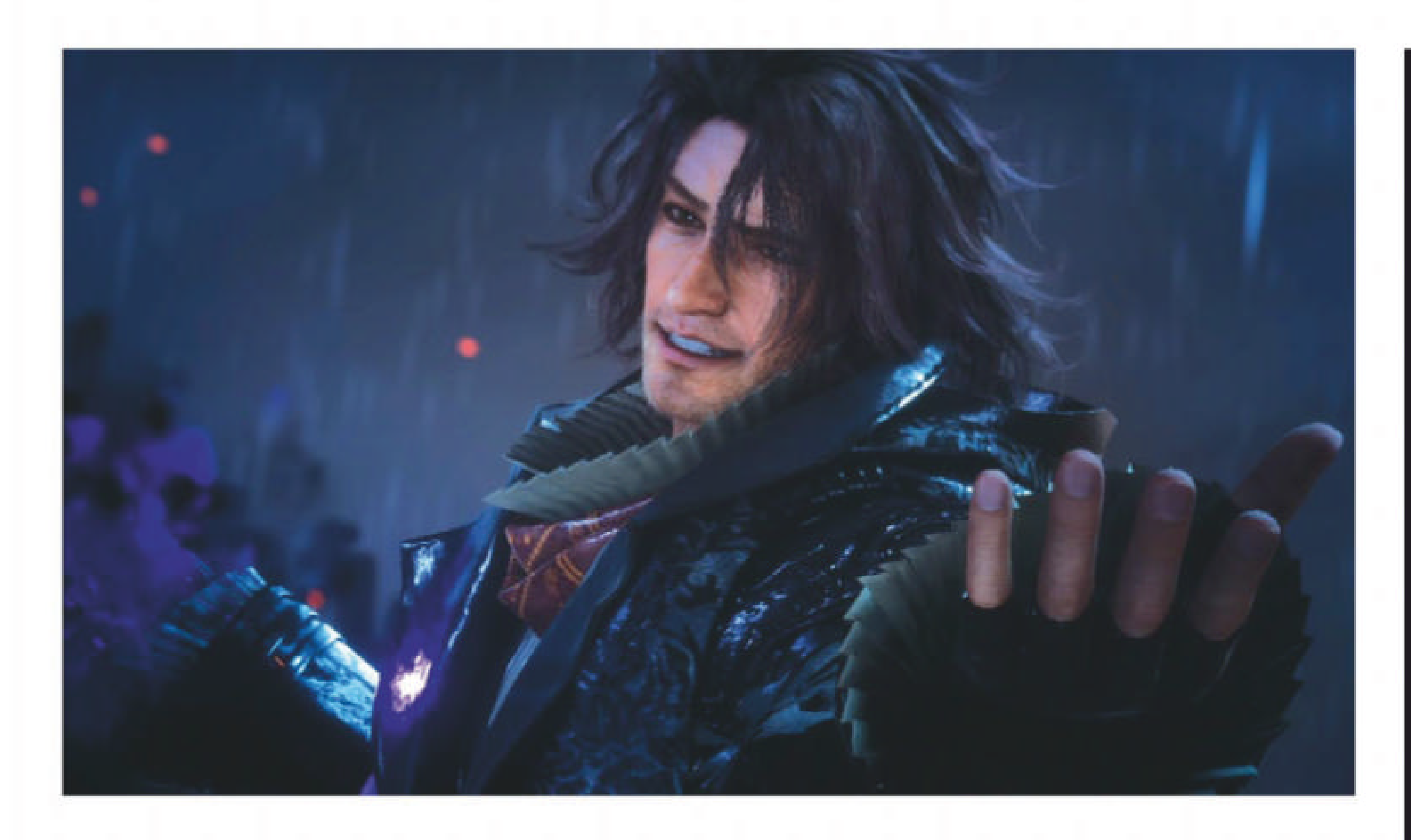
Out of gear
Cliff Bleszinski, creator of *Gears Of War*, has declared he is "NEVER making another game" in a heated Twitter exchange.



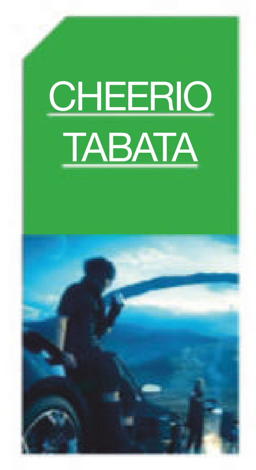
No respawn
Strategy guide publisher Prima Games has shut down, citing "challenging market conditions".



DoIt boy
A GameStop customer in America trashed his local shop after being told that he couldn't get a cash refund for *Fallout 76*.



CHEERIO TABATA





RIGHT With *FFXV* wrapping up, the developers can concentrate on other stuff, like releasing *FFXVI* before 2028.

Final bow

Final Fantasy XV director leaves Square Enix and DLC is cancelled

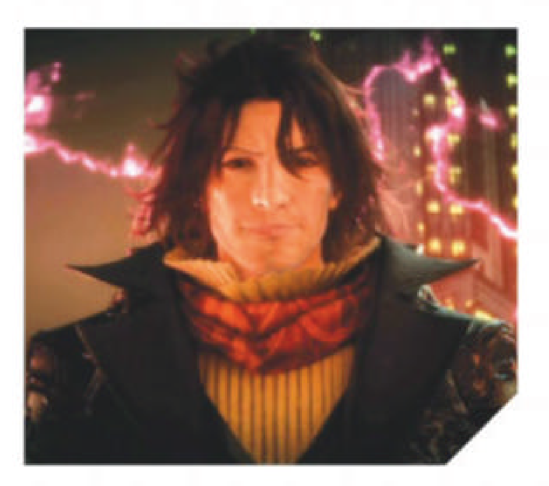
Square Enix has recently announced during a live stream that *Final Fantasy XV*'s director Hajime Tabata has resigned from Luminous Productions and has left the Square Enix Group. In a written statement, shown as part of the live stream, Tabata thanked all of the *FFXV* fans that have supported the game and wished all the best to Luminous Productions and Square Enix and their future endeavours. He also explained that his reason for leaving was to create his own business in order to realise his ambitions for his next project, which will be a brand new IP.

Alongside Tabata's departure, Square Enix also announced that the first of the four pieces of planned character-driven DLC, called *Episode Ardyn*, will now be the only DLC to be released, with development on the other three cancelled. *Episode Ardyn* will be set before the events of *FFXV* and will have the player taking control of *FFXV* primary antagonist, Ardyn. The DLC has a planned release for some time in March 2019.

Troubled times

FFXV initially suffered from a troubled development until Tabata took the reigns and made a bunch of sweeping changes in order to realise and deliver the game. This intense development period clearly had a huge impact on Tabata. He has previously revealed in an OXM interview how it felt to work on a single game for so long, saying that "it feels as though it's a part of my life". And when asked in the same interview what were the most important lessons learned while working on the game, he responded: "The importance of innovation, the importance of friends... and that working too much is not good."

Hajime Tabata's work has been applauded and he has made an indelible mark on the *Final Fantasy* franchise. We look forward to seeing what he comes up with next at his own development studio. ■

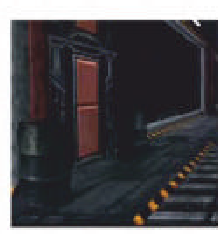


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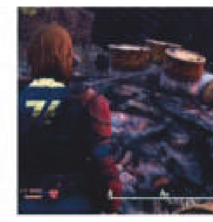
GAMING'S FAVOURITE PROP RATED BY OUR RESIDENT COOPER



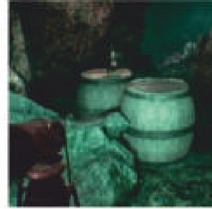
Ion Maiden 3D Realms' new shooter is brilliantly old-school, with barrels that look like they're from the 1990s. These beauts might be low on definition, but they exude cool.



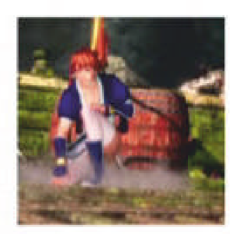
Fallout 76 Barrels are the cockroaches of the container world. They'll survive anything, including armageddon. *Fallout 76*'s Appalachia might be short on humans, but never barrels.



Call Of Cthulhu The 1920s was the heyday of the wooden barrel. This game's full of 'em, some of them probably contain fish. They certainly smell seafood-y. Especially that one on the right.



Dead Or Alive 6 Team Ninja has pared back the objectification of its fighting games' stars, but... check out the curves on those barrels! Move out of the way, Kasumi, so we can get a better look.



Resident Evil 2 Sinister things are afoot below Raccoon City. You can see these barrels conspiring on behalf of the Umbrella corporation. Do they contain the T-Virus? Or just some biscuits?





ENTER THE WEIRD

Seeing the light

Meet your new neighbours in Amanita Design's odd indie title, Creaks

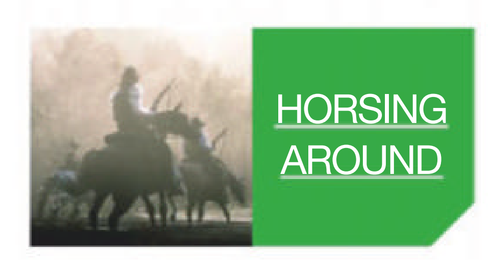
We love a bit of the strange, the eerie and the wonderful, and for many years now the green-eyed monster has been lurking around OXM Towers with a longing stare at Amanita Design. Well, the beast can go back in its hole because next year Xbox users may finally get to experience the excellence of this quirky indie studio.

Recently announced *Creaks* is an upcoming 2D horror puzzle adventure game that continues the studio's tradition of weird. Little is known about the game so far but the short announcement trailer reveals it to be a rather unsettling affair. The game will sport a gorgeous hand-drawn art style, similar to Amanita's previous games *Machinarium* and *Samorost*, and a fittingly arresting soundtrack. The majority of the game revolves around solving puzzles to progress but interestingly it won't be a point and click adventure like the aforementioned games.

Amanita is well versed in creating vexing environmental puzzles so expect a challenge. The game has tentatively been announced for 'PC and consoles' but we've got our fingers crossed for a release on the Xbox One. ■

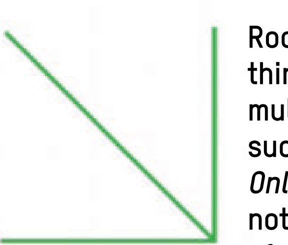
Creaks arrives sometime in 2019.





Red Dead Online comes to Xbox

Rockstar follows up its hit Western epic with an online mode that pushes it off the scale



Rockstar know a thing or two about multiplayer. The success of *GTA Online* has been nothing short of phenomenal, with the game still going strong five years since its release. So you'd surely expect the same of *Red Dead Online*, which has just arrived on Xbox One – bringing with it a ton of game modes and persistent online content that, like *GTA*, promises to keep fans playing for years to come.

At the time of **OXM** going to press, the Online mode was in beta testing, with Ultimate Edition owners first to play in its sandbox of cowboy delights on 27 November, followed by players who bought the game in the first three days of its October release, and then everyone else by 30 November.

This staggered start was, say Rockstar, so that it could "deliver a stable and fun experience while collecting as much crucial information and feedback as possible to help us continually improve *Red Dead Online*".

A robust and hugely detailed character creation suite kicks off the Online experience – with your as-yet unformed character under arrest in the sheriff's office, awaiting transfer to a prison to break rocks and await hanging for a murder you didn't commit. From there, after you obviously escape from prison, the world of *Red Dead* is yours to do with as you please, with Rockstar providing a ton of activities and the game's entire map open to players.

Shoot to thrill

So far the game contains five competitive modes called Showdown Series – including Shootout and Team Shootout (good old fashioned gunfights), Name Your Weapon, in which you score more points for using trickier weapons to kill your targets, and Most Wanted, in which every kill pushes you up the score board, while the higher you are, the more points others get for killing you. Hostile Territory mode sees you and your posse try to capture as much ground as possible, while Make It Count is a battle royale-style mode that requires you be last man standing with just a knife or a bow with limited arrows.

> **"The world provides the perfect setting for playing the game RPG-style"**

There are also race markers dotted around the map, for point-to-point horse races, and Events will spawn from time to time which you can choose to join in, or not. We loved the King of the Castle mode, in which one player attempts a King of the Hill style area-defence, while everyone else tries to kill them, and each other.

There are also heist-style Free Roam story missions, in which you team up with three other players to work together. In our first session we stole a horse and captured an outlaw, bringing him hog-tied back to the sheriff while fighting off his gang.

Aside from all this multiplayer fun, the world also provides the perfect setting for playing the game RPG-style, building your character with missions that allow you to play in your own way. No word yet on how long the beta testing will run for, but we're super-excited for where *Red Dead Online* is heading next, and we'll bring you more news and updates over the coming months. ■

Honor among cowboys

Honor is still very much a thing in *Red Dead Online*, with just as many opportunities to be good as to be bad. During our first session with the game, **OXM** found other players to be having some, um, creatively bad outlaw fun in all corners of the map. We also caught a cheeky cowpoke nicking a deer carcass from the back of our horse, and had to have words with our fists. Shocking behaviour, but then it is the Wild West.



ABOVE Seems like reasonable odds…

RIGHT In Free Roam story missions you'll be able to team up with three other players.

EXCITED? HORRIFIED? LET THE WORLD KNOW AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK





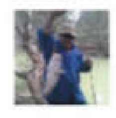


HOT TOPIC

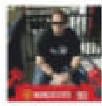
WHICH GAMES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE FOR XBOX IN 2019?



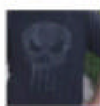
"Not so much a game but DLC, I'd like to see *Undead Nightmare 2* for *Red Dead Redemption 2*... that's the dream."
Stephen Redmond



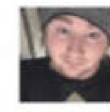
"*Red Dead Redemption 2* DLC: Finding Gavin..."
Kyle Mitchell



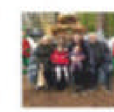
"*GTA 6*, *Gears 5* and *Mass Effect 5*, but it'd be nice to see Microsoft give us some quality exclusives."
Jason Lee Turner



"I would love to see an open-world modern-era crime action game that focused on gang warfare and was not as clichéd as *GTA V* was. A cross between *Mafia*, *Scarface* and *GTA*."
Steve Watson



"*Conker's Bad Fur Day* remake. Fully redone, achievements, the multiplayer from *Live & Reloaded*, so on. THEN a sequel based on sales/popularity."
Corey Ware



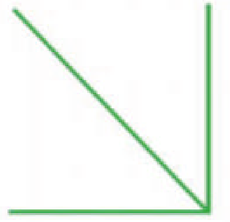
"*Fable 4* please – Playground Games do us proud."
Greg Wood

Agree with the above? Have your own ideas? Tell us at facebook.com/oxmuk

Steve Hogarty is...

The Fixer

Steve doesn't press Y quickly enough and tumbles off a cliff



Welcome to The Fixer, a monthly column in which I remedy gaming's most tired tropes and hackneyed clichés, everything from instant-fail stealth sections and escort missions, to boss characters who cackle behind bulletproof glass as the room you're standing in slowly fills with poison gas. But there was a time before I began my mercy mission, decades ago, when games were barely playable.

For example, every title screen in every game used to feature a man saying "Resident Evil" in a scary voice until, thanks to my tireless campaigning, the industry limited the practice to just the *Resident Evil* series. And disc drives, as made up as this sounds, would scab over if not routinely moisturised.

One in four game cases were filled with spider eggs. Controllers were the size of Nissan Micras, and required seven dockworkers to operate. And there was only one game, called *Big Henry*, in which you used the left and right triggers to zoom in and out of the face of a man called Henry as he chuckled and said friendly phrases like "welcome to Big Henry's house".

By addressing each issue in turn I have moulded our hobby into the glorious format we all enjoy today. Xboxes no longer say "ouch" when you plug them in, and weapon select screens don't play the *Are You Being Served?* theme tune on a loop. But despite all of this progress there is still work to be done. So this month, I'm focusing my fixer beams on one of gaming's most long-standing bugaboos: quick-time events.



The problem

The QTE is the last resort of the creatively broke developer. At best these button-mashing moments are barely interactive cutscenes, or mildly frustrating bouts of mindless busy work for idle fingers. At worst they are an abuse of the trusting relationship between designer and player, a tacit admission of a failure of imagination, as control is rudely wrestled away during a crescendo, to be replaced with dumb controller slapping and slack-jawed screen-gawping.

"The QTE is the last resort of the creatively broke developer"



QTEs were popularised by Dreamcast cult classic *Shenmue* when, at the very last minute, a canny developer realised entire sections of the game were playing themselves. Thinking quickly, Sega added on-screen button prompts to make the game's cutscenes feel more interactive, giving the audience the worst of both worlds: you still had no real control over the events unfolding in front of you, but now you had an opportunity to fail and have to try again. Finally, players could be *bad* at watching cutscenes, the only bits some of us were any good at.

The damage was done. For years afterwards every half-cocked action game stacked their levels high with these generic button-tapping sequences, usually as the main character cartwheeled and span around on screen like a Cirque du Soleil reject.

The solution

If the main role of a quick-time event is to prevent the player going out to make a cup of tea during cutscenes – just in case the protagonist has a football kicked at his head and they have to press B to dodge it – then the solution to getting rid of them is simple.

Ditch the QTEs and give players a short questionnaire after each cutscene, quizzing them on what they've just watched. What are the motivations of the ancient deity whose eons-long slumber you have just disturbed? How many times did the main character backflip through a window and land on a waiting speedboat? What colour stetson was the enemy moose wearing?

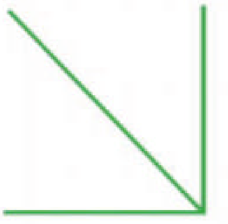
If the player cannot answer these questions, they're made to rewatch the scene again in slow-motion, until they've truly understood what's going on. High levels of engagement are maintained, but more importantly our hard-working fingers are allowed to take a well-deserved break. ■

Steve also writes for *City A.M.*

Chris Burke is...

The Editor

Chris ponders what exactly it means to choose a 'best' game



I just got back from the Golden Joysticks awards, which are kind of the Oscars for videogames, if the Oscars downgraded to a draughty tent in rainy London and they made George Clooney travel there by dirty bus. This is where the great and the good of videogaming business gather to drink copious amounts of complimentary Faketinis and console each other that The Crunch was worth it for a heavy, gold-ish, Joystick-shaped paperweight.

Only joking, of course. The Joysticks are a valuable and important recognition of excellence. I was there to present one. Not receive one – a scandalous example of oversight as there is no award for Best Games Magazine Focused Solely On Xbox, for which I like to think we'd be a shoe-in. Still, I was privileged to be able to hand one of those aforementioned gold-ish trophies to the lovely chaps from Playground Games, deservedly picking up an award after *Forza Horizon 4* was voted Top Xbox Game by you, the reader. Great stuff, congrats again Playground.

But it did get me thinking, as I basked in the glory of my 20 seconds up on stage: what is a 'Best' game anyway? At the Joysticks, it would depend on who you asked. Overall, the Best Game award went to *Fortnite*, as voted by the public. Us games journos, who decided on the Critics Choice Award, went for *Red Dead Redemption II*. And it's pretty obvious why, right? No one would really argue with either as sound choices for a Game Of The Year. *Fortnite*'s enjoyed the kind of popularity that used to be reserved for breathing; *Red Dead II*'s a technical marvel with superior storytelling and horse pile-ups. But is either going to be 'best' for everyone, necessarily? At that point I stopped worrying about it as another bottle of fizzy pop was handed to me by the lovely guys from Rare, and things mostly stopped being worrying for the rest of the night.



"Is a game good because it's ludicrously challenging?"

Back at **OXM** Towers, it's that time of year when Old Father Time rocks up with his curved stabby stick and ushers in a new, miserably cold month, and we magazine journos like to look back on the year we have had and raise our Faketinis to all the stuff we already wrote about.



So you'll find, in this very issue, our Games Of The Year, which is basically us saying, there you go, you played it, we played it, we said it was good, you agreed, let's close the door on this before something gets out.

But selecting those games was actually *hard work*. Some of the games in our final reckoning were only originally given an 8 out of 10 by **OXM** reviewers. Now 8 is of course a very good score, but time itself has lent some extra credit to some of those titles, particularly in these days of games-as-service. Now we've taken the time to really get into the game, they've somehow stayed in our Xbox's disc tray and now feel like a well-worn, favourite pair of jeans.

Defining terms

What crazy science goes into deciding on 'best' games? Is a game good just because it's popular? If so, *Fortnite* must be amazing. Is a game good because it's ludicrously challenging, and therefore is only for the 'real' gamers? *Dark Souls* would win every time. Do we go on technical things like frame-rates and teraflops and, um, framey-wamey floppy-flops – the kind of tech-pushing performance that dazzles and amazes? Do we look for great storytelling and superior narrative beats? Well, it's all of the above, but filtered through a fine gauze of whatever-floats-your-boat and distilled into a beaker of suit-yourself.

All of which is to say that this Best Game thing's all just a bit of fun. So when the trolls and goblins are taking to social media to rubbish our choices for Game Of The Year, don't come crying to me. Yes, there's no definitive right or wrong, it's all subjective. Let's all just have a gamer love-in here and agree there are no good games and there are no bad games. Oh wait. Except those games we voted as 'Worst'. They were definitely awful. ■

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preview
PREVIEW
The games we want the most
VICTORI
VICTORIA

We've mentioned *Crackdown 3* a minimum of 1,560 times in OXM as coming soon, and now it really is! Promise!



OXM'S MOST WANTED

Chris' pick
Crackdown 3
Feels like we've waited for ever for this and it's really happening, which makes me very excited. Look out for more next month!

Adam's pick
Maid Of Sker
I'm always looking for the next game that'll scare the hell out of me and from the looks of things *Maid Of Sker* is suitably chilling and I can't wait to see more.

Russell's pick
Ion Maiden
Looking forward to this one. Have fond memories of 'Run For The Hills', 'Can I Play With Madness' and... what's that you say? Oh, right, it's not them. Well, I'm still looking forward to it.

We've certainly got quite the mixed bag for this month's preview section. Are you sitting comfortably? Good, because to kick things off we've got the announcement that half the world has been waiting for. Crackdown 3 has finally been given a proper release date. Yes, we know what you're thinking but this really, really, is the absolute final, solid as a rock, release date. You can find that coveted piece of information as well as some juicy details on its explosive multiplayer mode on p26. Meanwhile, over on p28, 3D Realms has been looking to the past to create its latest title, the bombastic Ion Maiden. It's pulled out its old 'Build' engine, which as far as we remember hasn't been used in a gazillion years, to make it but we're loving the retro look it's got going on. For those interested in something a little scarier than running around shooting up cybernetic soldiers we have Wales Interactive's Maid Of Sker (p30), a game inspired by Welsh folklore that's sure to raise the hairs on your neck. Finally, thanks to a recent live stream we were blessed with a whole host of new details for Anthem (p36). If you're interested in customising your own character, then prepare for a treat because we've got all the details on the newly announced Forge customisation. Enjoy!



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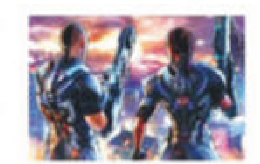
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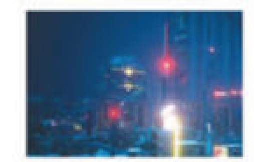


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Yes, you can play as Terry Crews







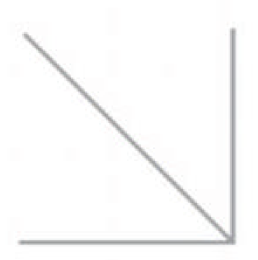


Crackdown 3

Uncontrolled demolitions and death from above in multiplayer

Robin Valentine

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS **DEVELOPER** SUMO DIGITAL
ETA 15 FEBRUARY 2019



HOLO-DECKED OUT

The conceit of the multiplayer is that it's the Agency's training program, with each map being a simulated combat arena, and the aesthetic reflects that. The floor, and the few other indestructible elements of the environment, have a *Tron*-like, wireframe look, as do elements of the background, such as the asteroids floating above Nova Station. The destructible buildings, however, look like a slice of a real (if futuristic) city. It's visually interesting, but also makes it crystal clear what's blow-up-able.

Not only does Microsoft's next killer exclusive finally have a release date – 15 February next year – but we've also been treated to an extended look at its explosive multiplayer. While you may be most looking forward to getting let loose in the open world and hunting down agility orbs, the online half of *Crackdown 3* is not to be overlooked. If you've got an appetite for destruction, it might just be your new favourite competitive shooter…

Sheer, uncontained destruction is the name of the game. Across the densely packed maps, every building is fully destructible, crumbling into broken pieces whenever a stray rocket hits – making cover only ever a temporary convenience.

Each player comes equipped to take advantage of their fragile surroundings. For your primary weapon, you pick a familiar anti-personnel weapon – a shotgun, a machine pistol, a plasma rifle, even a mini-gun – but your secondary slot is always something a little… less subtle. Whether you go for homing rockets, a micro-missile launcher or the appropriately named 'Annihilator', the idea is you'll always have the means to blast your way through, into or out of any building you choose.

The destruction physics ensure every firefight is infused with action-movie drama – glass shattering as you burst out of a window to ambush the enemy, bridges collapsing behind you as you sprint to safety, skyscrapers falling like jenga towers as you skirmish around them. This is chaos on a scale that would make The Rock say, "Hey, calm down guys."

> **"Chaos on a scale that would make The Rock say, 'Hey, calm down guys'"**

Crack in action

The actual shooting has some very generous auto-aim – essentially a full target-lock, so if they're in your sights, you're going to hit them – which means mobility is king. If you're being targeted, you want to get away ASAP, ready to ambush someone else while their back is turned.

The good news is, *Crackdown 3*'s multiplayer maps are built for just that. Each player has a jetpack with plenty of juice, and there's loads of verticality, thanks to the tall, closely-packed buildings. Cleverly-placed jump-pads provide even more assistance in getting above your foe and out of their eyeline. Until they decide to blow the foundations out from under you, that is…

Get the (literal) drop on someone from up high, and you can slam down on them with a devastating ground-pound, smashing through masonry as you go. But you'll need to be quick about it, as everyone can see each other's silhouettes through walls, to prevent people just camping in the many possible hiding spaces. Ambush here isn't about stealth, it's about speed – and a talent for demolition.

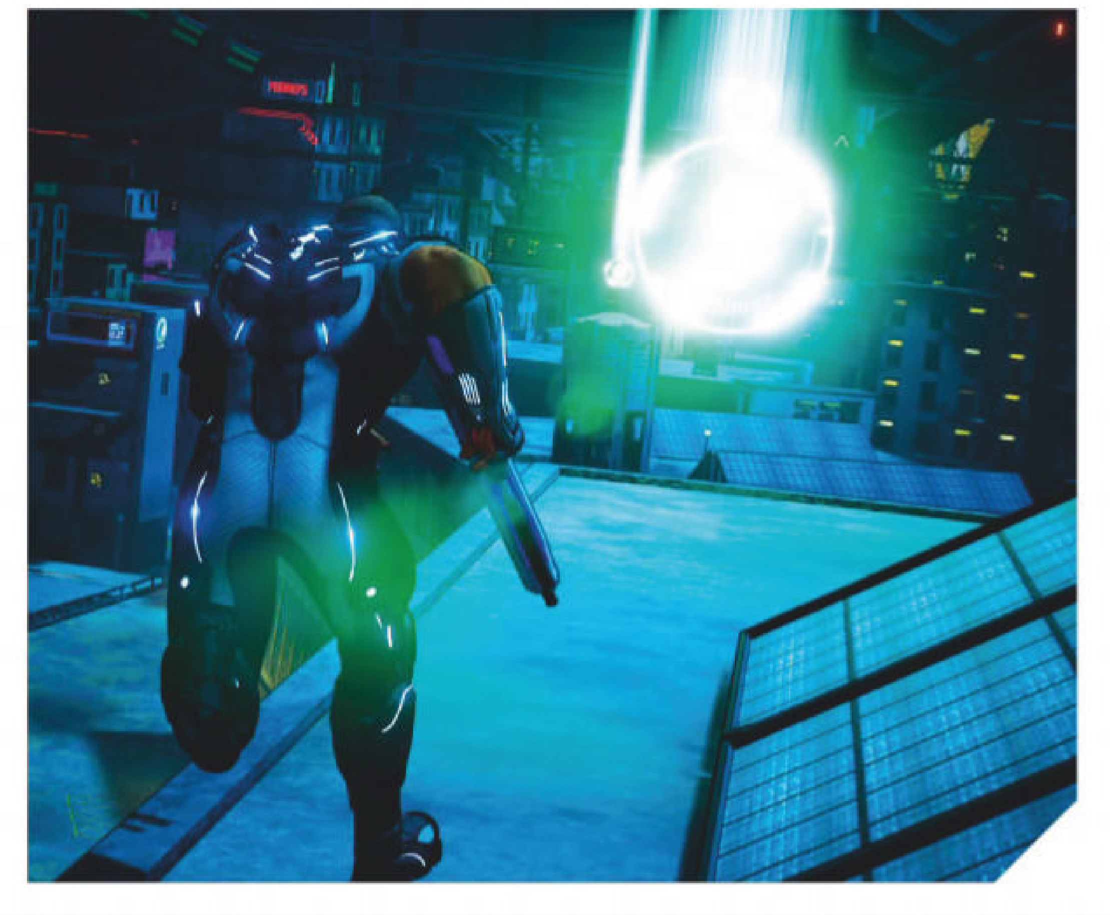
You'd expect all this physics-based anarchy to be hell on your console, but the devs are promising that, with a portion of the calculations offloaded to Microsoft's cloud computing, it'll run smooth on any hardware. That means whether you're on Xbox One, Xbox One X, or a gaming PC, you'll have the same experience – so no one has a sneaky framerate advantage.

The two modes announced so far feel familiar – there's Kill Confirmed, where you only get points for downed enemies if you can grab the dogtags off their bodies, and Territories, which sees you fighting for control zones which, once drained of points, move elsewhere on the map. But the core wall-smashing, ground-pounding, map-flattening combat marks this out as a unique online offering. ■





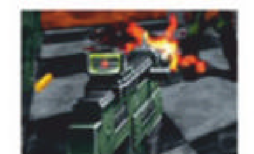




ABOVE As you play, you'll unlock customisation options such as weapon skins and 'lenswear'.

FAR LEFT Click in the left stick for a quick evade when you're attacked – and then leg it to safety.

Ion Maiden will be the first game that 3D Realms have developed for the Xbox One console







Ion Maiden

A blast from the past is bringing us this bombastic badass shooter

Adam Bryant

PUBLISHER 3D REALMS **DEVELOPER** VOIDPOINT/3D REALMS
ETA TBC



KEN WE BUILD IT

The Build engine was initially released in 1995 and created by game programmer Ken Silverman, who was just 20 years old at the time. The games that were produced had a striking resemblance to those that were made using the *Doom* engine from id Software. That's because Silverman was inspired by id Software's *Wolfenstein 3D*. The rest, as they say, is history.

Well this is a pleasant surprise. We're getting increasingly accustomed to seeing remakes of older games and reboots of franchises, but what we're not used to seeing are brand new games being developed using old-school engines, but that's exactly what developers 3D Realms and Voidpoint are bringing to the table.

The developers have gone traipsing around in their attic and pulled out their classic Build engine, blown off the dust and put it back into commission for their latest game, *Ion Maiden*. This is the same engine that was used back in the day to develop the studio's previous games, most notably *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Shadow Warrior* and *Blood*, and will mark the first time in 19 years that the engine has been used commercially. They've even used the same old-school tools and methodologies to bring it to life. Of course this will be a modified version of the engine, to make it compatible with modern systems and to take advantage of advancements in game technology, but the game will look and feel like a game from the '90s because of it.

Ion Maiden is a first-person shooter and prequel to the PC-only top-down action role playing game *Bombshell*, and takes its name from the cybernetic arm that the protagonist sports in that game. You'll be playing as bomb disposal expert Shelly 'Bombshell' Harrison, who works for the Global Defence Force. You'll be tasked with taking down the evil Dr Jadus Heskel. Heskel was once a leading mind in the field of technological augmentation, but has now amassed a huge cybernetic army and unleashed it on the city of Neo DC. An obvious detail to note is that as this is a prequel Shelly has yet to obtain her cybernetic arm, and we'll most likely witness that significant moment at some point during play.

"It has its sights aimed at fans of the developers' previous games"

World of secrets

There will be seven zones for you to explore, each of which will span across multiple maps, and of course in fitting with the games to which it pays homages, it will have secrets for you to find around every corner. You'll also have a huge range of weaponry at your disposal to play around with where every weapon has an alternate firing mode.

The game may be built upon the foundations of an old engine but the developers have made use of modern processing power, technology and up-to-date game design to bring a bigger and better game than would have been available 20 years ago. That also means that the game will offer players more of a challenge. For example, the movement of your character is performed in exactly the same way as modern first-person shooters, so your aiming will need to be more accurate. Before, in those types of games, you would only need to shoot in the general direction of an enemy and they'd go down.

Accompanying all of the bombastic action is a fitting synth-laced retro soundtrack to hype you up while you're blasting away. The developers have confirmed that the game will feature a multiplayer mode so you'll be able to tear it up with friends online once the product is released.

The game has its sights aimed squarely at fans of the developers' previous games and it looks like they're doing a good job of hitting the mark. It looks and feels like everything you would expect: fast-paced action, cheesy one-liners and vast open levels with copious amounts of enemies to blast into oblivion. ■









ABOVE The bigger the gun the harder they fall, as the saying goes.

FAR LEFT You'll bump into a whole swathe of unique enemies that aren't too pleased to see you.

Elizabeth Williams is said to have died of a broken heart while locked inside one of the rooms of Sker House

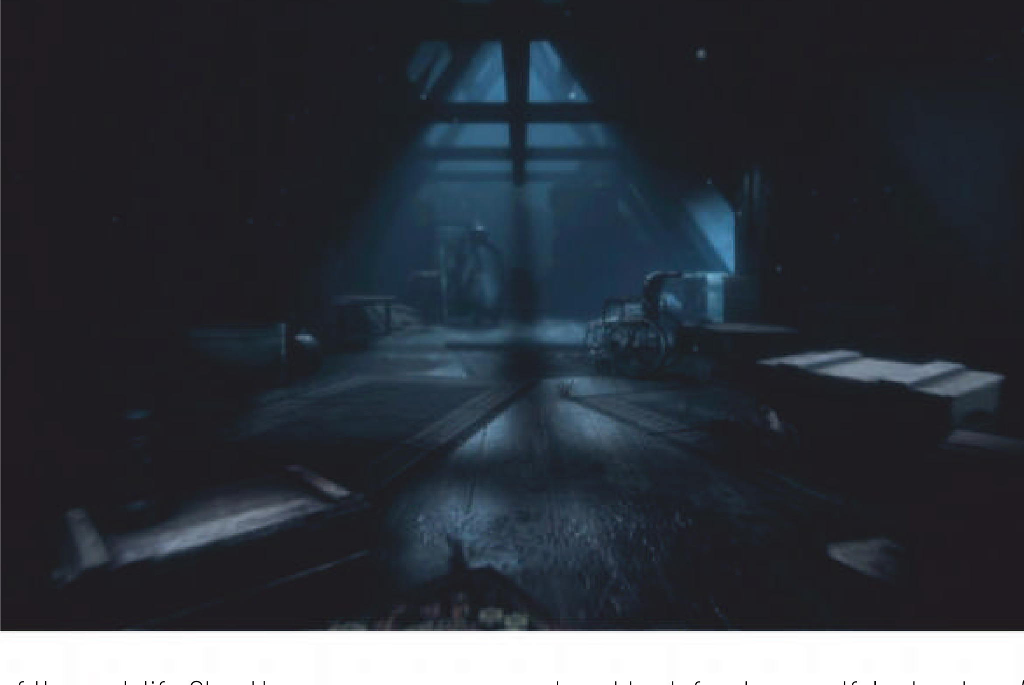


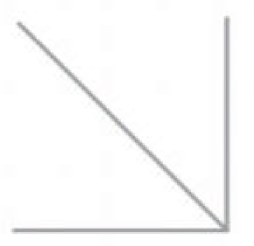
Maid Of Sker

Beware. A tale of forbidden love holds unimaginable horrors at Sker House

Adam Bryant

PUBLISHER WALES INTERACTIVE **DEVELOPER** WALES INTERACTIVE **ETA** 2019





A building constructed by monks to praise their god, dating back 900 years, and a story of two star-crossed lovers sounds like the perfect breeding ground for a first-person survival horror game. Wales Interactive will be delving deep into its local history for its latest title, *Maid Of Sker*.

Taking inspiration from the 19th century novel of the same name by RD Blackmore, and the Welsh folk song, which also shares the name, by Thomas Evans, Wales Interactive will be crafting its own story which promises to be a "truly terrifying survival horror that reignites one of the more haunting tales in Wales".

Set in 1898, the story will take place in and around the remote hotel of Sker House, which is a fictional recreation of the real-life Sker House, a residence which still stands today and one that many believe to be haunted. You'll take on the role of musician Thomas Evans, who arrives at the house in order to save the woman he loves, Elizabeth Williams.

Like many of the best horror games of late you'll have no weapons at hand to defend yourself. Instead you'll need to rely on cunning and stealth to survive what awaits you. A 3D sound-based AI will be implemented within the core of gameplay and you'll need to explore this spooky locale using items that you find to distract and trap the many enemies that are looking to off you. However, as you progress through the game this will become increasingly difficult and all you'll be left to do is hold your breath while the enemy passes.

"You'll need to rely on cunning and stealth to survive what awaits you"

Fate awaits

The game's story will be non-linear and will feature a branching narrative which leads to at least three different endings. So all of your decisions and actions matter and will impact how the story unfolds.

The suitably haunting announcement trailer, which is narrated with an alternative and chilling rendition of Evans' ballad, gives us a short glimpse of the studio's intent. It also shows the game's visual aesthetic.

Wales Interactive has previous when it comes to making horror games: it developed an adaptation for the horror film *Don't Knock Twice*, which similarly had you exploring a grand manor house with an evil presence. We can only imagine the developers learned a great deal about what works and what doesn't in terms of 'bring on the scares'.

The most exciting thing about this title is its ties to real people and the events that are believed to have occurred. How they will tie in all of its inspirations, given that they differ greatly, will be anyone's guess, but we certainly look forward to finding out. ■



BELOW It might look picturesque but whatever lies beyond that threshold is sure to frighten.

1764's *The Castle Of Otranto* by Horace Walpole is considered to be the first gothic horror novel

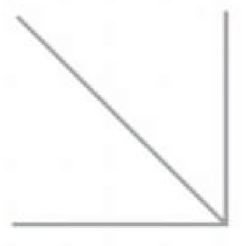


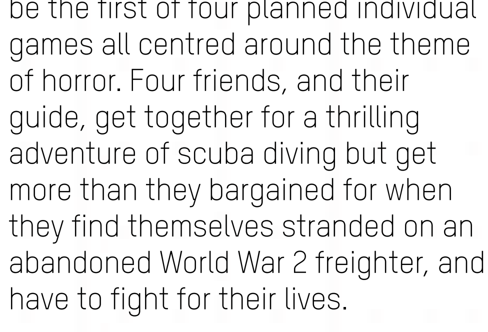
Man Of Medan

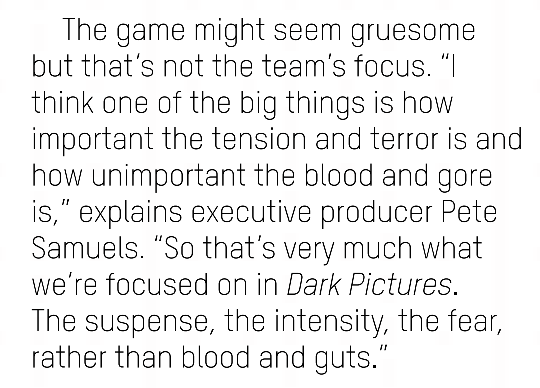
Enter the Curator's repository, he's got a scary story to tell

Adam Bryant

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO **DEVELOPER** SUPERMASSIVE GAMES **ETA** 2019







We may have moved well away from the spooky season and into the next equally scary festive one but Supermassive Games are continuing to bring on the scares with *Man Of Medan*, the first part of its *Dark Pictures Anthology*.

In its latest trailer we got a short glimpse of the mysterious narrator of the anthology, known as the Curator. This enigmatic character will be played by actor Pip Torrens, who you may recognise from Netflix's *The Crown* series. This set-up is very similar to the studio's previous game *Until Dawn*, in which at certain moments you're taken out of the story that's unfolding and allowed to discuss your progress with a strange character. *Man Of Medan* will be the first of four planned individual games all centred around the theme of horror. Four friends, and their guide, get together for a thrilling adventure of scuba diving but get more than they bargained for when they find themselves stranded on an abandoned World War 2 freighter, and have to fight for their lives.

"We're focused on suspense and the intensity rather than blood and guts"

The game might seem gruesome but that's not the team's focus. "I think one of the big things is how important the tension and terror is and how unimportant the blood and gore is," explains executive producer Pete Samuels. "So that's very much what we're focused on in *Dark Pictures*. The suspense, the intensity, the fear, rather than blood and guts."

Dark tales

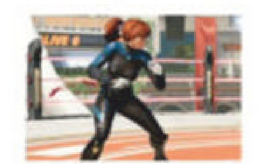
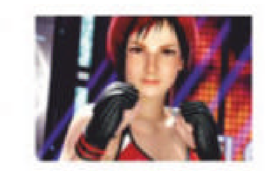
Although set in the same universe, each game in the anthology will feature a whole new cast of characters and a completely unique story pulled from the 39 subgenres of horror that Supermassive has identified. The Curator, however, will be a continuous entity for each of the games and will be there to set up the story for the player. This seems remarkably similar to the early '90s television horror anthology *Tales From The Crypt* where you'll get an introduction to the story, and once the story is concluded, a talk about how things went. There's a lot of mystery and intrigue surrounding this character and according to Bandai Namco the Curator is a timeless entity who resides within a library that contains every story ever told. It's possible that he has been around for thousands of years, but even the Curator himself is unsure of that little detail. What he does know is everything about the story in which you'll take part. Although he's unable to reveal any clues as to exactly what happens, he will offer cryptic words to those ready to decipher them.

The game is already showing so much potential, not least for scaring the pants off us. ■



BELOW He's less interested in the wellbeing of the Queen and more in how you'll die.

A movie of the series was made in 2006, *DOA: Dead Or Alive*. We don't advise watching it, though

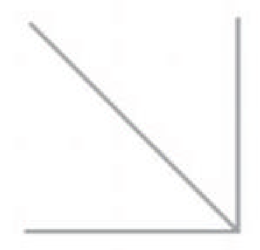



Dead Or Alive 6

Fight like an alley cat in the new entry into the far-from-Dead series

Chris Burke

PUBLISHER KOEI TECMO **DEVELOPER** TEAM NINJA
ETA 15 FEBRUARY 2019



GAIDEN-ER'S WORLD

Tecmo's brilliant *Ninja Gaiden* games are set in the same universe as the *Dead Or Alive* series, and that game's main protagonist Ryu Hayabusa has been one of the main playable fighters in the game since the beginning. A super ninja, Ryu is a master of the ancient Hayabusa style of Ninjutsu, and his day job is apparently an antique shop owner. Go figure.

***Dead Or Alive* has grown up. Not only is the latest in the long-running fighting series – named 6, but actually, astonishingly, the 19th title in Tecmo's franchise – the first on the Xbox One, it's also attempting to position itself as a more serious fighter. That's not an easy thing to do when most people's associations with it might be that of pneumatic young ladies scrapping it out by the pool in the beach volleyball-meets-UFC stylings of *Dead Or Alive 3 Extreme Volleyball* back on the OG Xbox.**

But with an insistence that there *is* a story here (dastardly plans of sinister corporations), and by putting equal emphasis on the fact that there *are* male fighters here, *DOA 6* promises to be less about the t'n'a, and more about the 'triangle'.

Fights in *DOA* are based on what developers Team Ninja call a 'triangle system': strikes beat throws, throws beat holds, holds beat strikes. If you're thinking that sounds like rock, paper, scissors, you'd be right – almost ridiculously simple, right? But when you add to that a new special attack meter for *DOA 6* called the Break Gauge system, meaning you can Break Blow, or Break Hold, to counter some of those moves, plus a mash-up of combo moves such as the new Fatal Rush, you've got a sufficiently complex fighting system to give you an arsenal of mad skills to bring to the Tournament.

All fight on the night

Twenty fighters have been confirmed so far, with only one new character confirmed – Diego, a Mexican-American street fighter who enters the DOA Tournament to get money to help look after his sick mother. So we already know he's one of the good guys. Returning favourites include ex-ninja Kasumi, assassin Christie, opera singer Helena (opera singers are notoriously good at fighting), wrestling stars Bass and his daughter Tina, former Russian special forces soldier Bayman, an oil rig worker called, um, Rig, and best of all Ryu Hayabusa – the ninja from the *Ninja Gaiden* series.

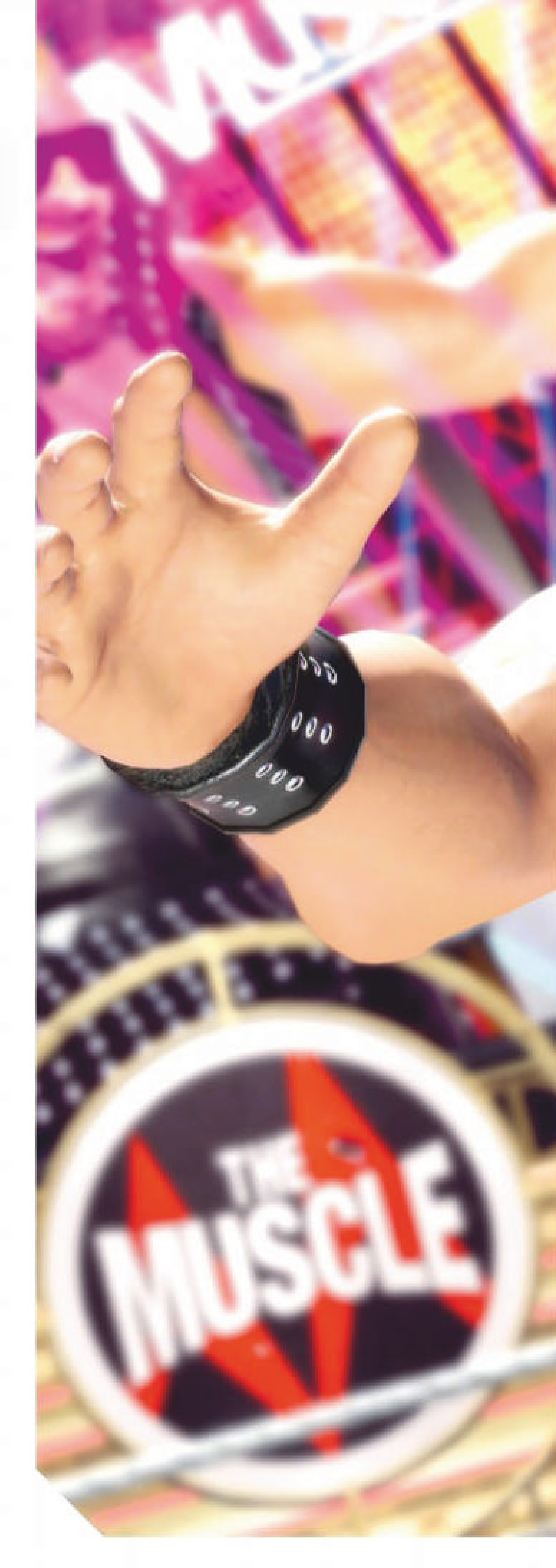
New stages include The Muscle (a wrestling ring), jungle arena Lost Paradise, DOA Colosseum (arena for the DOA Tournament itself), and Road Rage – the scene of a horrific traffic collision. Minus, we hope, any blood or bodies. There's also a pirate ship-based arena called Forbidden Fortune, the transition for which involves getting your opponent grabbed by a giant octopus tentacle and smashed through to the deck below.

Environments are nicely destructible, and you can earn extra damage by smacking your opponents into boxes, jars and crates; or run around smashing them up before your opponent can use them against you.

The Throwdown is our favourite of the arenas we've seen – a gritty, urban back-alley in which the crowd gathered around to watch the fight even get involved, becoming themselves a part of your arsenal of environmental attacks. Sling your opponent into the crowd, and they will push them back into the action, causing that fighter to lose their balance and stagger.

Team Ninja has set out its intent for the series here, and have deliberately toned down the sexualisation of the franchise to focus on the series as a valid eSports title. They also promise a "cohesive" single-player campaign that should appeal to western Xbox audience as well as more traditional Japanese fighting game fans. And there's not a volleyball in sight. The game's expected in February 2019. ■

> **"The crowd themselves become a part of your arsenal of attacks"**









ABOVE Wrestling star Bass returns, along with the Muscle arena – a WWE-style wrestling ring.

FAR LEFT The series' infamous ladies return, only with more clothes.

While queueing for Arena mode, you'll be able to relax with other players in a hot tub. Yes, really

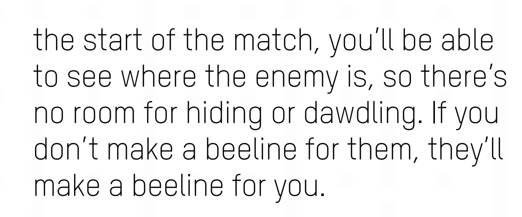


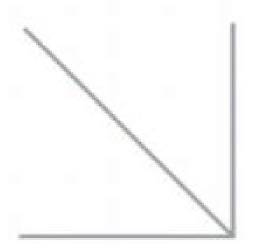
Sea Of Thieves: The Arena

New free update adds more player-on-player piracy

Robin Valentine

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS **DEVELOPER** RARE
ETA EARLY 2019





Whether on land or at sea, there's no honour among thieves. Put two pirate crews on the same island, and they'll find something to scrap over – that's just basic buccaneer psychology. Rare's naval sandbox proves this rule every day, packed with player-on-player conflict over treasure, cargo and, occasionally, chickens. But apparently it's not enough for the developer's taste, and the game's next update is set to encourage more PvP than ever.

The (free) Arena expansion, due early next year, will get bloodthirsty players right into the action, rather than leaving them to hope for random encounters. While in Adventure mode – the name the developers are now using to refer to the existing game – you'll be able to travel to a new tavern to queue for Arena mode. Each match will see your team and the enemy being given maps leading to the same treasure. From there, it's a race to see who can claim the spoils first.

The result is a kind of condensed *Sea Of Thieves* experience – more action in a shorter space of time. From the start of the match, you'll be able to see where the enemy is, so there's no room for hiding or dawdling. If you don't make a beeline for them, they'll make a beeline for you.

"The result is a kind of condensed Sea Of Thieves experience"

Dog days

As you battle, you'll earn clout with a whole new trading company, the Sea Dogs, led by DeMarco Singh, son of the Pirate Lord. As you advance, you'll gain cool new items, including a flash cutlass, and you're free to bring these back into Adventure mode. While progression is staying largely the same, the addition of a fourth faction does shake things up slightly – in order to become a Pirate Legend, you'll still need to reach level 50 with three companies, but it can be any three out of the four.

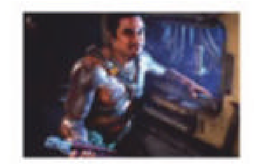
You may need a full crew in order to take part in Arena though – while solo play is being tested, Rare hasn't decided yet whether it'll be included. Comments from the devs so far suggest matches will be four crews max; whether it'll be a free-for-all or two-on-two remains to be seen.

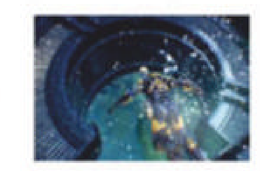
For those keen to get involved early, Rare will be running tests of the new mode as part of its Pioneers programme, allowing players to try it out and offer feedback – so make sure to join up now if you're chomping at the bit to buckle some swashes. But if all this scrapping isn't your cup of tea, never fear – support's not drying up for Adventure mode any time soon. Via Twitter, the game's design director Mike Chapman explains: "So exciting to announce The Arena and all the fun it will bring, but there are also new features, tools and opportunities for Adventure coming."

BELOW Arena is a response to some players asking for more action and shorter sessions.



One of the pre-set decals lets you make your Javelin look like *Mass Effect*'s N7 armour





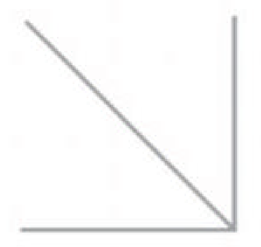


Anthem

Your suit, your look, your powers – it's all up to you

Robin Valentine

PUBLISHER EA **DEVELOPER** BIOWARE
ETA 22 FEBRUARY 2019



SOAR POINT

Every Javelin can fly, but different suits approach it in different ways. Storm can hover for extended periods of time, and works best when you can stick to the air during combat. The heavy Colossus, meanwhile, is more earthbound, overheating quickly if it tries to stay airborne for too long. Flight is surprisingly nuanced, allowing you to hover, boost, evade and launch ground-pounding melee attacks from the air. Depending on your build, it's either your way out of sticky situations, or your means of diving headlong into them.

As a developer, BioWare's always been concerned with player choice. Though its latest title, an MMO shooter in the mould of *Destiny*, is a very different beast than anything it's put out before, that emphasis on going your own way remains – whether you're choosing your loadout, exploring the open world at your whim… or spending hours looking for the perfect colour scheme for your exosuit.

Yep, mech-loving fashionistas rejoice – *Anthem*'s character customisation system, dubbed The Forge, is remarkably robust, allowing you to tweak nearly every aspect of your suit's design. Not only can you change components and colours, but you can even decide what material each section of your armour is made of, and its overall condition, from worn and dirty to shiny and new.

And, unusually, this cosmetic tinkering is being kept entirely separate from your stats. In fact, no visual element of your character ever has an impact on their abilities – and vice versa. Even, say, a new helmet or chestplate is only for showing off, which does ensure you never have to stick to an ugly outfit just because it gives you the best buffs.

Your playstyle in combat is instead determined by which guns, 'gear' and Javelin mech suit you bring for that mission. Pick the mage-like Storm, for example, with long-range weaponry and items granting a lightning-bolt attack, freezing ice-shards and a projectile-blocking wind wall, and you're ready to play a crowd-controlling support, hovering above the battlefield and raining down a storm from on high.

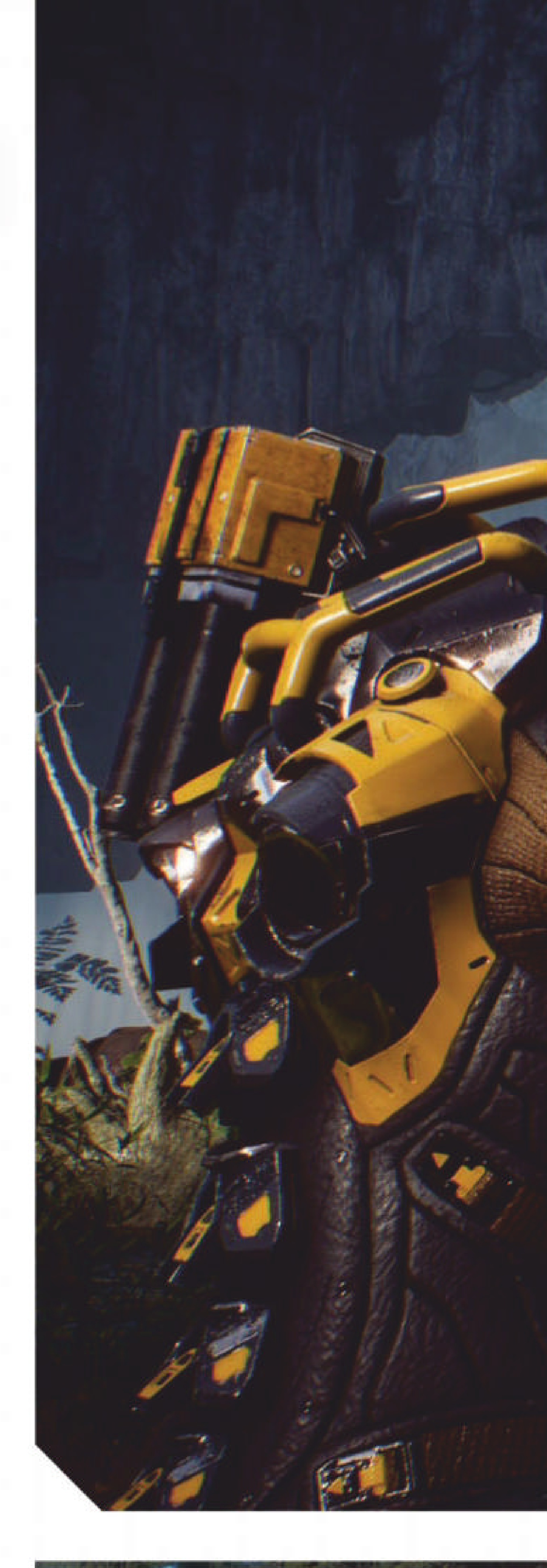
"You can even decide what material each section of your armour is made of"

Class war

Though there are only four Javelins to choose from, each can be used to create a variety of wildly different builds. The Interceptor, for example, excels as a sort of cyber-ninja, leaping and dashing into combat and hitting enemies with lightning-infused kicks – or, you can take entirely the opposite tack, speccing them as a sneaky sniper, using that agility to keep back and throwing out long-range stuns to set up for their devastating shots. Get bored of a particular way of doing things, and you're free to change things up before the next mission, or swap to a different Javelin entirely. If variety is the spice of life, then *Anthem* is shaping up to be the five-alarm chilli of videogames.

The only build you won't find among any of the mechs is healer. Everyone's responsible for their own health bar, either keeping their regenerating shield up to prevent lasting damage, or wading into the thick of the fray to grab restorative orbs from fallen foes. That's not to say there's no teamwork, however – pick the right gear, and you can support your allies by cleansing them of harmful status effects, inflicting debuffs on foes that make them take more damage from your friends, or deploying a tactical shield to tank incoming fire.

And when you head out into the world, freedom's still king. The appropriately-named free play mode randomises the world's enemy and wildlife spawns, and sends you out to explore at your leisure. Dotted around the map are dynamic world events, challenging you to do everything from stabilising dangerous ancient artifacts to opening arcane vaults – with plenty of gunplay along the way. Even in the more directed story missions, there's never anything stopping you from just flying off to see what's over that next ridge. Well, other than your friends yelling at you to come back, that is… ■









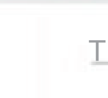
ABOVE On an official livestream, lead producer Ben Irving revealed the post-launch plan is "to keep adding cool stuff forever".

FAR LEFT You can choose custom animations for your start-of-mission arrival and end-of-mission victory pose, as well as a loadout of emotes.

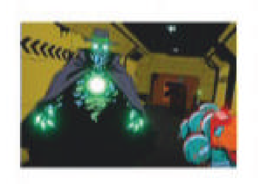


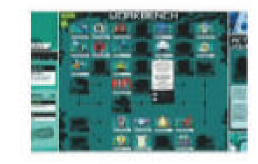
ABOVE Convicts are stored as freeze-dried powder packets – just add water to create a new character…

RIGHT The mutant enemies are brilliantly grotesque, taking inspiration from pulp sci-fi comic books.



The game's story was penned by former games journalist Cara Ellison







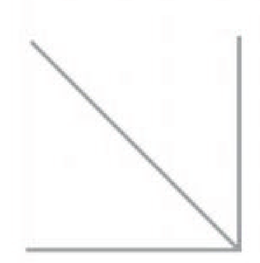


Void Bastards

In space, no one can hear you swear...

Robin Valentine

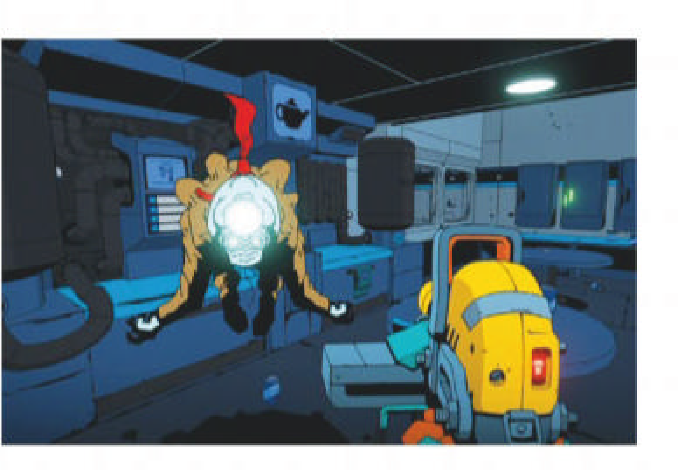
PUBLISHER BLUE MANCHU **DEVELOPER** BLUE MANCHU
ETA EARLY 2019



MANCHU BACKER

Chey founded and self-funded the Australia-based Blue Manchu as a way to work on game ideas that specifically interested him, regardless of their mass-market appeal. The studio's first, and so far only, release was *Card Hunter*, an online, free-to-play browser-based game combining elements of CCGs and tabletop RPGs, and sporting a similarly 2D-centric art style to *Void Bastards*. Over the five years since launch it's received substantial support through new adventures, expansions and updates.





It's certainly an attention-grabbing title, eh? But what should really pique your interest is the talent behind it. Developer Blue Manchu is headed up by Jonathan Chey, co-founder of Irrational Games and one of the key minds behind classics like *BioShock* and *System Shock 2*.

This sci-fi 'strategy-shooter' ambitiously aims to "take the *Shock* lineage into new territory". Thematically, it seems more on the System end of things, with the action taking place aboard derelict spaceships full of volatile mutants, hostile security robots and malevolent artificial intelligences.

Tasked with making your way across a dangerous nebula, you must plan your journey on the starmap by moving from wreck to wreck. At each, you can scope out the ship's layout and plan your approach, noting what nasties and hazards lurk within, and how you might turn the various automated systems aboard to your advantage.

From here, you embark for some first-person exploration and, inevitably, combat, as you make your way through the corridors stealing anything that isn't nailed down. Putting your plans into action, you might sneak to the ship's generator and switch off the power, deactivating the automated defences but plunging you into darkness. Or perhaps it's better to leave the lights on, and fight your way to the security module to shut those defences down manually, allowing you to still use other systems – such as the airlocks and electronic doors – to mess with your enemies.

> "Developer Blue Manchu is keen to emphasise that player choice is king"

In battle, you play one of an endless succession of condemned convicts, each with their own individual perks and hindrances that alter how they play, from faster reloading, to colourblindness, to unusual shortness. When one dies, they're gone forever, though there's always another to replace them. But keep them alive, and you can alter their traits over time, adding new ones you like and erasing old ones you don't.

Even if your casualty rate is high, you won't find yourself falling behind – all the tools, weapons, and upgrades you've crafted from resources found aboard the derelicts carry over between characters, ensuring you're always making progress through the procedurally-generated campaign. Among the gadgets ready to be jury-rigged together are distracting cat-bots, poison darts, guns that shoot rifts in space and time, and all manner of unpredictable explosives – an arsenal rife with both strategic possibilities, as well as chances to cause chaos.

Developer Blue Manchu is keen to emphasise that player choice is king in *Void Bastards*. Expect no hand-holding – it's completely up to you how you tackle each ship, and to set your own goals on the starmap.

Panel show

The comic book-inspired art style is immediately striking, too, painting space in bold, neon colours. Enemies are rendered as flat 2D sprites, creating an effect pleasingly reminiscent of the original *Doom*, while the 3D environments are brought to life with stark cel-shading. Adding to the atmosphere is your chatty AI companion BACS, voiced with perfect fussiness by Kevan Brighting, known for his role as the Narrator in PC game *The Stanley Parable*.

Like what you see? The good news is, you don't have long to wait – *Void Bastards* is coming in early 2019, and it'll be on Xbox Games Pass as soon as it launches, too. ■

roundup







THERE ARE MONSTERS AND ALIENS APLENTY AS UNIVERSES COLLIDE IN THIS MONTH'S ROUNDUP **ADAM BRYANT**

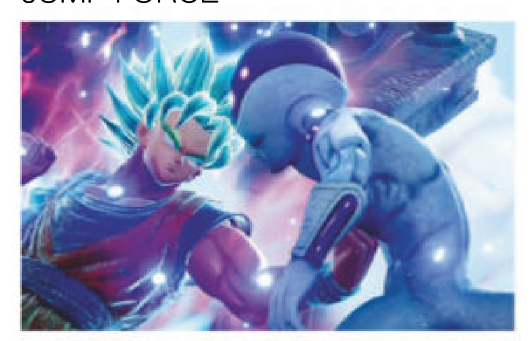
DEVIL MAY CRY 5



PUBLISHER CAPCOM **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM **DUE** 8 MARCH 2019

'The Void' has been revealed for *Devil May Cry 5*. This practice mode allows players to experiment with enemies, weapons, moves and combos. Those new to the series can use the mode to gain mastery of the skills required to obtain the S style ranking. You'll face off against enemies to see how your moves work, and change the settings to have the enemy attack or to remain still.

JUMP FORCE



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO **DEVELOPER** BANDAI NAMCO **DUE** 15 FEBRUARY 2019

There's been a steady stream of updates for this all-star anime fighting game. In the latest trailer Bandai Namco has showcased characters from the *Dragon Ball Z* franchise. Along with showing off some iconic moves, characters Goku and Vegeta are seen changing into their Super Saiyan God Super Saiyan forms, whereas all-round bad egg Frieza reveals his Golden form. Exciting stuff.

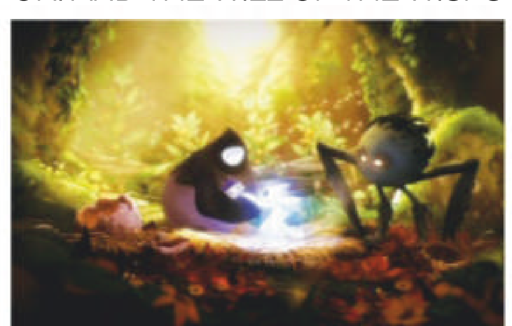
KINGDOM HEARTS 3



PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX **DUE** 25 JANUARY 2019

Oh bother. A new trailer has dropped for everyone's favourite *Final Fantasy* and Disney crossover that sees protagonist Sora visiting 100 Acre Wood, and make friends with Winnie the Pooh and pals. Winnie is seen making some pretty tough demands of Sora for them to be together forever, but we're just happy to go adventuring with him, so he can demand whatever he likes.

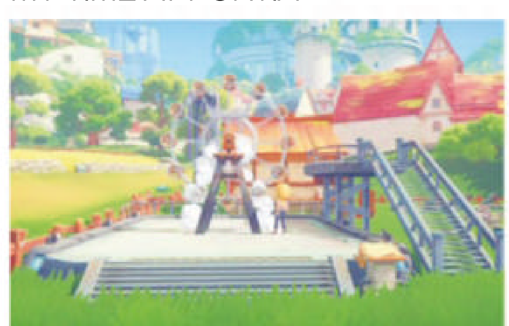
ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS



PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS **DEVELOPER** MOON STUDIOS **DUE** 2019

Those who loved the first *Ori* game and are excited for its sequel will be glad to know that the game will be available on Xbox Game Pass in 2019. The previous game arrives on 20 December. Join Ori and family as you "embark on an all new adventure to discover the mysteries beyond the forest of Nibel, uncover the hidden truths of those lost, and unravel Ori's true destiny".

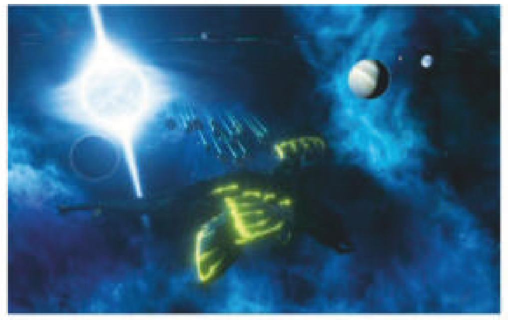
MY TIME AT PORTIA



PUBLISHER TEAM 17 **DEVELOPER** PATHEA GAMES **DUE** 2019

We were already sold on this adorable Ghibli inspired farming simulation RPG, but a new trailer has shed more light on it. As well as being able to adventure across the post-apocalyptic land you can mine and gather materials and hulk them back to your home where you'll receive commissions to craft all manner of things such as bridges, water tanks and even vehicles.

STELLARIS: CONSOLE EDITION



PUBLISHER PARADOX INTERACTIVE **DEVELOPER** PARADOX INTERACTIVE **DUE** EARLY 2019

Popular grand strategy game *Stellaris* is on its way to Xbox One. Explore, trade, battle and build your own empire in this epic sci-fi real-time strategy game. The game will feature deep strategic gameplay in procedurally generated galaxies and will collect all of the extra content coming to PC. This includes the Plantoids Species Pack and the Leviathan Story pack.

FOR MORE PREVIEWS AND THE LATEST GAMES CHECK OUT GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM



TWICE BITTEN

Resident Evil 2 returns the series to its roots, reworking a 20-year-old classic and bringing survival horror back to its best. OXM got hands-on and found it scarily familiar…

CHRIS BURKE



It's been 20 years since this writer was last in Racoon City's sprawling police station. It was another time, another console. Returning to it now is as if the years have melted away. Of course, usually what happens when you revisit old games is that you realise you've remembered it through a rose-tinted filter, but not this time. *Resident Evil 2*'s even better than you remember.

That's because, of course, survival horror innovator Capcom has chosen to revisit its classic second *Resident Evil* game, updating its visuals and mechanics for 2018. Gone are the fixed camera angles and the blockier, pixelly graphics in favour of the now familiar *Resident Evil 4*-style, over-the-shoulder action camera, and Xbox One X-enhanced sharply realistic character models, backgrounds and effects. It's a treat for the eyes and thumbs alright, but it's also a game that pays serious fan-service by changing very little else.

Younger gamers might find some of the game's 20-year-old ideas other-worldly. Firstly, there's the '90s setting with quaint concepts such as saving your progress with typewriters, rolls of film that need developing in a dark room, and complete lack of smart phones. There are also the fundamentals of the game mechanics – devised, ingeniously at the time, out of technical constraints and limitations on the size of the play area possible, but retained faithfully and somehow still made to feel fresh here.

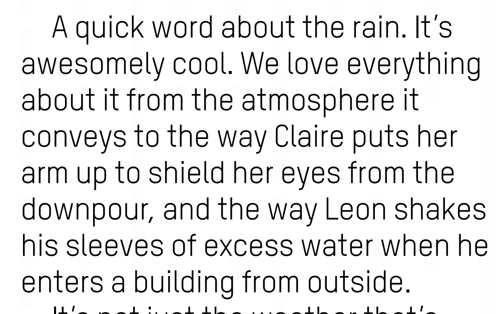
The genius of Capcom's first two games was in that these limitations were used to also convey the claustrophobia and fear that helped the games feel like interactive horror movies. It's weirdly refreshing that *Resident Evil 2*'s puzzles and gameplay devices still follow the same ideas they did 20 years ago. Keys, crank shafts and combinations to door locks must be found in order to open up areas of the game's central Police Station location, and consequently you'll often find yourself returning to an area time and again as objects are found, puzzles solved and doors opened up. It's certainly not an open world game – quite the opposite, in fact. It's as claustrophobic and limiting as it ever was, and we *love* that.

"We had requests from the fans for many years to create a remake of *Resident Evil 2*," explains producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi as to why the time was right for a new version of the game. "We wanted to not only respond to our passionate fan base but also deliver a whole new zombie horror gaming experience that utilised the Capcom in-house proprietary engine, RE Engine, to bring it to life on current gaming consoles and also attract a whole new audience that may not have been around for the original release in 1998. We also wanted to have players feel new kinds of possibilities for *Resident Evil* by combining the Metroidvania-style exploration and survival horror of the original game with the latest modern game experience."

And they've delivered that in spades, if **OXM**'s playthrough is anything to go by. Our hands-on time with the game begins with rookie cop Leon S Kennedy, who's turned up for his first day on the job only to discover that everyone's dead, or undead. We're starting somewhere in the middle of his campaign – both Leon and student Claire Redfield each have their own distinct playthrough, echoing the original.

Leon meets the enigmatic Ada Wong in the underground car park, and we leave with her to go out into the pouring rain in an eerily silent Racoon City street.

ABOVE Leon and Claire are the stars once more.



A quick word about the rain. It's awesomely cool. We love everything about it from the atmosphere it conveys to the way Claire puts her arm up to shield her eyes from the downpour, and the way Leon shakes his sleeves of excess water when he enters a building from outside.

It's not just the weather that's improved though, but the game's story beats. Leon and Ada need to pass through a gun shop, and it's here we see a strong example of the remake's newly emotional depth for the first time. The gun shop owner emerges with a shotgun trained on Leon and Ada, in a beautifully-worked cutscene in which it becomes apparent he's protecting his daughter, who's turning into a zombie. It's harrowing,



"No matter how many times we shoot this zombie, it gets back up again"

emotionally, and also provides a motivation for Leon to continue to risk himself in the outbreak, rather than just getting the hell out of Raccoon – something that was just not really considered too much in the original. It also helps in showing real dimensions to the main protagonists Leon and Ada – something that the series has occasionally strived for, particularly in the heavily story-led episodic *Revelations 2*, which also stars Claire. Here, the writing of the new *Resident Evil 2* is top-notch. But rest assured, if you're a fan of the series' schlockier, B-movie aesthetic, there's still some of it lurking below the surface as Leon still delivers choice lines like, "Chew on that, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Down and dirty

We follow Ada down into the city's sewers. They've never looked so disgusting. As Leon slops his way through the city's subterranean crap-pipes, we're ever-alert for monsters of course – and it's not long before we get an earthquake-level rumbling and a glimpse of… something huge… passing by in an adjoining sewer.

It's another nod to the original, in which Leon is chased down a sewer by the giant alligator. It's a nice touch for all those who remember it the first time. The alligator is not the only faithful return. Ada Wong's impractical heels and slip of a red party dress (did she come from an actual party? Does she always dress like that?) also return, as we take control of the mysterious agent for the next section of our playthrough. This focuses on puzzles as Ada chases evil scientist Annette Birkin, the wife of T-Virus creator William Birkin. Ada has some neat tech that can be used to hack into and change the flow of fuse boxes and power terminals, and trace power cables to their source.

Pretty soon, Ada's stuck in a locked control room with no way out, and a single zombie. This is the first time in the playthrough that we actually get close to one of the shambling dead, and it's quite the eye-opener. Ada only has a handful of rounds in her handgun. No problem we think, remembering how easy it usually



ABOVE Cutscenes are superb, with convincing animation and voice acting.



is to off a solitary zombie with one well-aimed bullet through the brain. These zombies just won't stay down. They'll *go down*, but no matter how many times we shoot this one through the eyes, it gets back up again. We try shooting out its legs, but it's still crawling around trying to nibble Ada's high-heels. And now we're out of ammo. We have to locate the source of the door lock's power, so we can switch it and escape – not easy when you have to keep one eye on where the little ankle-biter is while he crawls around trying to snack on our calves.

It's a nice turnaround for the series which had at times become more about the action, particularly with *5* and *6*. Now, one single zombie is enough to cause you significant problems, and a fair degree of scares.

Exiting the room is out of the frying pan and into, well, a room *full* of zombies. Here we really struggle, as we have to use Ada's device, called an EMF Visualizer, while trying not to get eaten by half a dozen of the things. After a number of deaths and restarts (punishingly back to the first room again), Ada solves her puzzle and we're on our way. But now we're out of the frying pan, via that room full of zombies, and quite literally into the fire. Annette Birkin has Ada trapped in a furnace. The clock is ticking down – we have one minute to stop its ignition using our very best puzzle-solving skills. Can anyone smell burning?

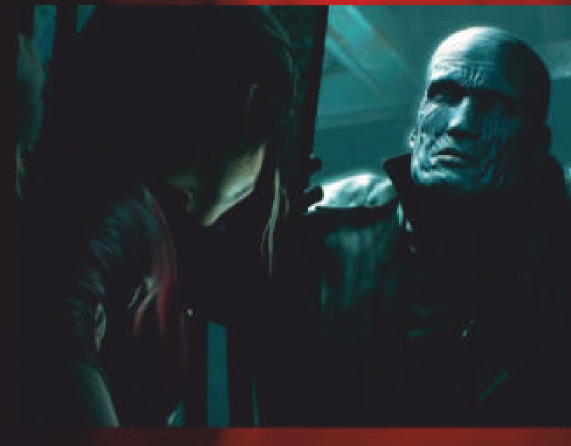
Things get Claire-r

The next part of our playthrough puts us in Claire's shoes, and begins in the same parking lot as Leon's. This time Claire's being followed around by Annette and William Birkin's little daughter Sherry – an ally by this point. Unfortunately, we meet an Umbrella stooge who wants to take Sherry back to her parents against her will, and she only agrees when he threatens to kill Claire. He, we later discover from a picture in a newspaper that's lying around the police station, is Police Chief Irons – though 1998 gamers will recognise him instantly, with an HD makeover of course. Irons takes Sherry away, but we notice that there are some convenient-sized access hatches and holes in walls that a small person can crawl through – as with Natalia, the child who helps Claire in *Revelations 2* by accessing such spaces – so we're thinking that Sherry may have a similar role. We've been

ABOVE Claire's never looked lovelier, or dirtier, than with the benefit of Xbox One X's visual capabilities.

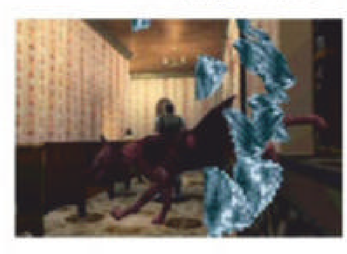
BELOW It's a Tyrant, and it's bloody difficult to kill… help!







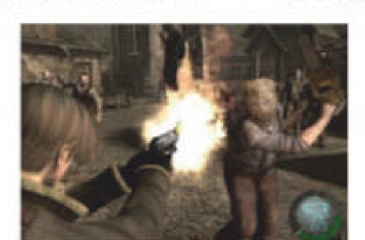
RESIDENT EVIL'S MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS



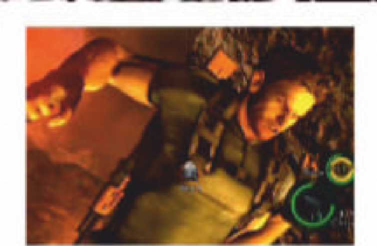
DOGGIES RESIDENT EVIL
Less impactful in the remake, but the 1996 game had zombie dogs crash through a window, and it's stayed in our nightmares ever since…



MIRRORS RESIDENT EVIL 2
Exploring RCPD's interrogation rooms as Claire, one of these skinless, blind, long-tongued bastards crashes through the two way mirror.



VILLAGES RESIDENT EVIL 4
We pooped ourselves at the scale and literal game-changing new perspective of Leon's besieging by hordes of infected. Then Doctor Salvador turned up…



ROCKS RESIDENT EVIL 5
Action-filled *Resi 5* also saw a button-mashing moment resulting in Chris smacking a boulder into a lava lake. Did not see that coming.



CLOSETS REVELATIONS
A radio mayday leads Jill to a cupboard, but its sender's already mutated into a bloated thing with a conjoined twin and a chainsaw arm. Eek!



ABOVE The Tyrants return, and this time they're wearing hats.

"One single zombie is enough to cause you significant problems"

teased that there is a new section of the game involving an orphanage, new to the remake and likely a part of Sherry's story.

Back and forth

Now we have access to the Police Station proper, and this is where we begin the familiar gameplay mechanic of finding keys and other objects to progress through the many rooms, returning to the same ones often to find there are new monsters present. Actually, how many rooms does this bloody station have? Honestly, we've seen enough cop shows to know US police stations are never *this* big.

First we need to retrieve a diamond-shaped key (one of a familiar set of heart, diamond, spade and club-shaped keys), for which we first need to get through the kennels. We brace ourselves for zombie dogs, of the kind that gave us nightmares after the first game. Instead we find Lickers (oh sure, that's much better) – the game's iconic, grotesque and visually challenged wall crawlers.

Claire has her trademark grenade-launcher with flame rounds, so we've soon barbecued the horrible things. Taking a look through Claire's limited inventory, we find more familiarity. Flame and Acid Rounds return for the grenade launcher, with ammo craftable from found gunpowder. Those red, green and blue potted plants are back too. Green ones heal, blues detoxify; reds are combined with the others for extra-strength. There are stash boxes where you can store stuff you don't need on your person – useful as your inventory is limited; and things like the grenade launcher, or extra-large cogs or bits of puzzle-machinery, take up two slots. It's another part of the mechanic that will have you running back and forth across the map to retrieve that thing you found earlier, that you've now discovered a use for. This is very much in keeping with the series as a whole, and something we fondly remember about the 1998 game.

"The team always wanted *Resident Evil 2* to stay true to the original but also deliver the best zombie entertainment experience to date," says Hirabayashi. The RE Engine was created for *Resident Evil 7*, and Capcom were keen to use that to its full potential here. Hirabayashi explains that the mission was to "fine tune the modern horror experience



GOING VIRAL

Know your T from your G with our quick guide to Resident Evil's viruses

G-VIRUS
The Golgotha virus was created by Umbrella scientist William Birkin, and used on himself. It's a mutated strain of the T-Virus that regenerates lost or damaged tissue… and makes eyeballs appear in awkward places, like on your back.

LAS PLAGAS VIRUS
A spore-based parasite found in fossils and used by a weird Spanish cult called Los Illuminados. The Las Plagas virus takes over the host's nervous system, effectively turning them into mindless unstoppable zombies who can't feel pain but can be controlled by a master.

PROGENITOR VIRUS
The original and best, discovered from a species of African flower by the Umbrella Corporation's founders, and then used in all their subsequent biological research. By combining it with leech DNA, they found it could mutate to form large and very, very nasty creatures.

T-VIRUS
The Tyrant Virus is a strain of the progenitor virus, involving leech DNA – ugh – that was responsible for the incident at the Spencer Mansion in the late '90s. Easily transmitted, it kills its host immediately then mutates and reanimates the corpse as a brain-dead husk whose only instinct is to feed on the living. Makes zombie people, dogs, fish, spiders and plants. Big 'uns too.

T-ABYSS VIRUS
A fishy version of the Tyrant virus. The Abyss virus was developed with the discovery of a new species of deep sea fish, then Bioterrorist organisation Veltro combined it with the T-Virus. Causes victims to need to constantly absorb fluid… including the bodily fluids of humans. Ooze a pretty virus then?

ABOVE We tried not to stare at his boil, we really did.

that we saw critics and fans respond so well to with *Resident Evil 7*. We know that one thing our fan base is really into is the lore of the series, so for us it was important to retain that classic *Resident Evil 2* storyline and classic gameplay experience – whilst still making small design tweaks that allows it to match modern gamers' expectations. For example, the addition of the subweapon allowing you to escape attacks, custom creation of ammo, weapon modifications and so on are game mechanics we've added that will make the experience even more exciting."

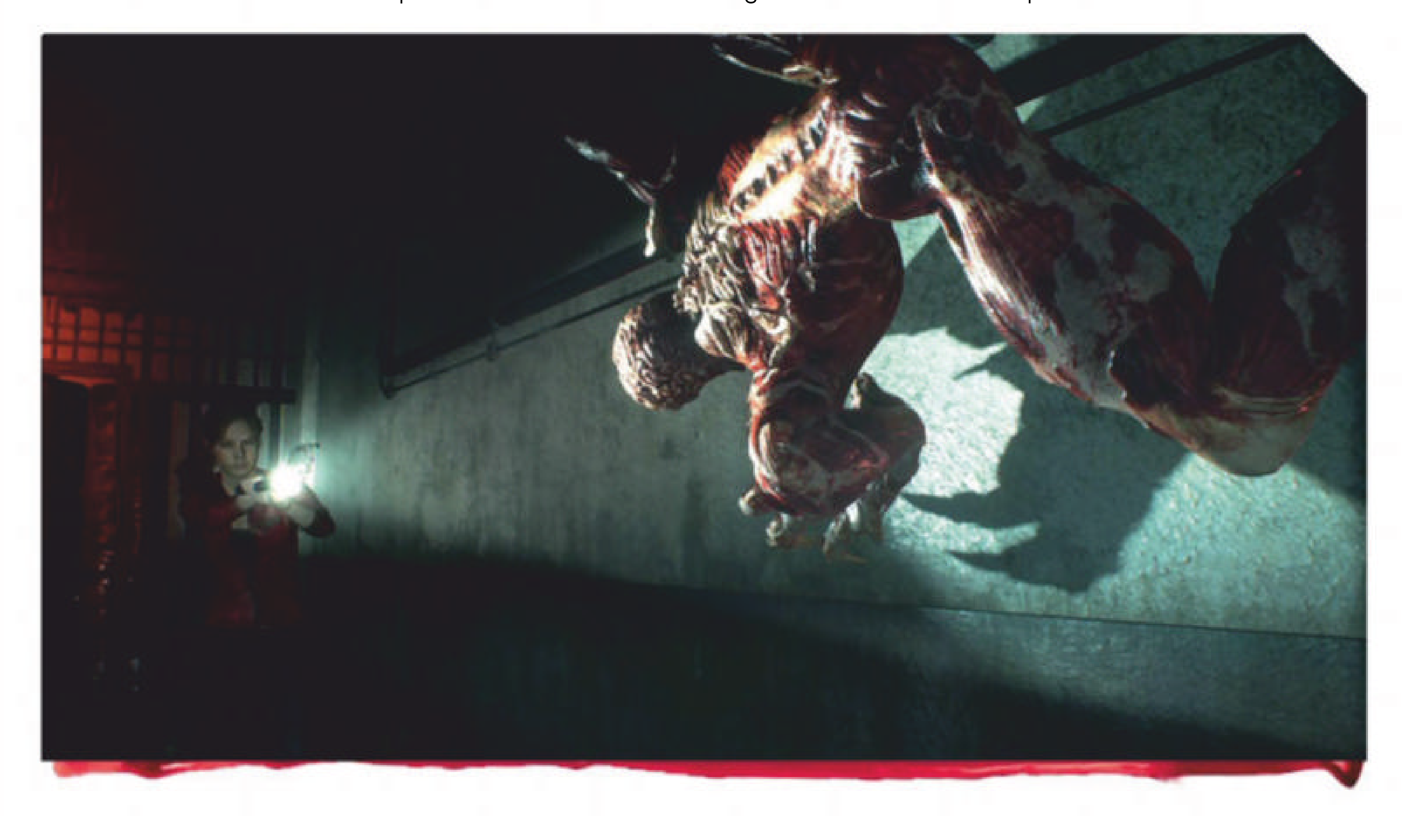
Exciting, yes. Scary, definitely. In the morgue there are a number of cadaver trays just waiting to be opened. Some are empty; one of them, and it actually made us jump, is full of enormous cockroaches. A couple of trays have corpses on them… which are in no way going to get up and bite us. No, definitely not. One of them has something glinting in his hand. We take it, and we'll let you guess what happens next…

Totally stuffed

We can now access the frankly over-the-top Police Chief's office. As in the original, Chief Irons has a thing for taxidermy, and his offices are stuffed with stuffed things, even a tiger. It's also so gorgeously and faithfully recreated that if you played the 20-year-old game you will feel a sense of deja vu, albeit in much higher resolution. But as we're running back and forth all over the cop-shop, things are getting increasingly frantic as ammo runs short, and the zombies start to overrun the police station.

Arguably, the series' toughest monster is the trenchcoat-wearing Tyrant sometimes known as 'Mr X', and his appearance now stirs in us a long-dormant terror we've been suppressing for years. This big bastard is like the Terminator – an unstoppable mutated super soldier that you can do nothing but run away from. He's not too hard to evade, as he's quite slow – but try to run past him and he grabs you by the face and throws you across the room; get cornered by him and he pounds you into the floor with his fists. He's now on our case, and that's going to make things difficult – especially as there are now loads of Lickers around the place, and more zombies than ever.

When you're grabbed, if you have a knife, a tap of LB enables you to escape by sticking your blade into the creature. It's wise to finish it off just so you can retrieve the knife, which acts as a 'get out of jail' card for when



you get overwhelmed. Grenades can also be rammed into zombies' mouths, useful for taking a few of them out. Zombies are relentless and have never looked better or moved more frighteningly to brainlessly overpower you. At one point we were taken down by two of them at once – it's pant-wetting stuff; discovering that zombies are *even worse* than you thought.

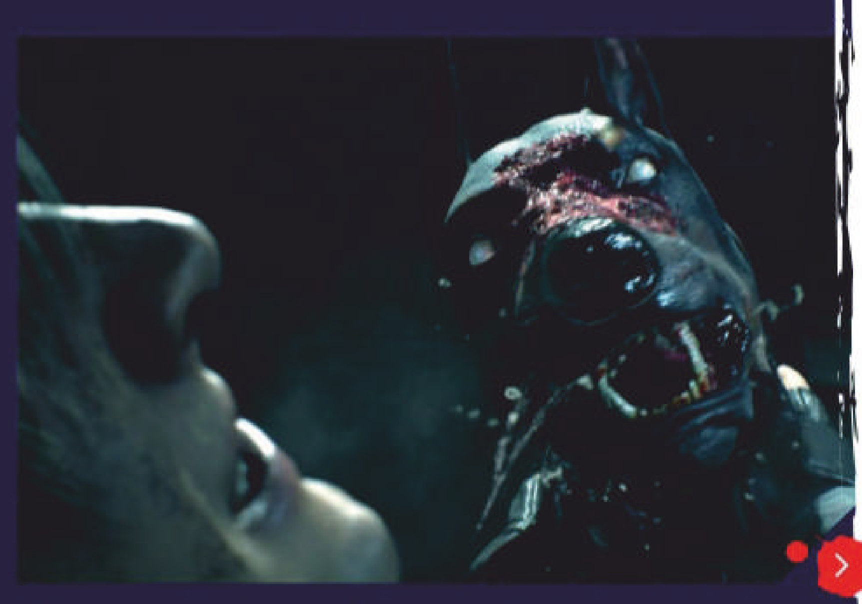
We barely have time to admire the recreation of the police station's iconic front desk, locker rooms and offices as we hare around trying to find the objects we need – constantly having to go back into a room we know is full of bad things. Meanwhile the Tyrant is following us, we have no ammo, and so our playthrough ends in inauspicious defeat. The game, when it opened up to us, also threw so many monsters at us that we began to really, seriously regret not conserving ammo earlier on. It's actually a really key element of the original *Resident Evil* games that we'd almost forgotten about – the series invented 'survival horror' after all, and each decision you make, particularly regarding resources and routes through each room, the limited ammo and tactical approach needed, is still key to that.

"We have a lot of respect for the original game and want to treat it with care," stresses Hirabayashi. "But at the same time, we felt the need to bring something new both to new players and those who have experienced the original. So we kept some key parts of the game the same, while rebuilding the gameplay, story, puzzles and the route you take through the game around those parts. As for fan service, yes, we definitely wanted to keep as many of those iconic moments as possible which we know everyone remembers fondly."

There's no doubt Capcom has pulled off a fan-pleasing remake of a fondly remembered classic. But more than that, the game's visual and gameplay updates should help it to become a true *modern* classic when it lands in January 2019.

"We have a lot of respect for the original game and want to treat it with care"

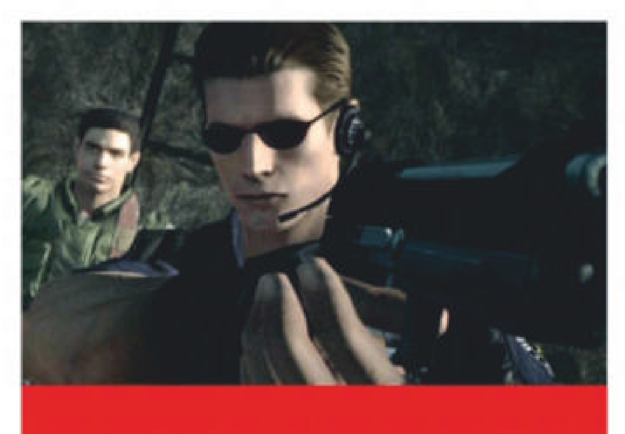
ABOVE Oh my word, just what did you eat, Raccoon City?



Resident Evil on Xbox

ALMOST THE ENTIRE SERIES IS AVAILABLE TO PLAY ON YOUR FAVOURITE CONSOLE…

The survival horror series started life on a certain Japanese console of course, so we Xbox-ers are late to the party. Fortunately, a good many of the later games have been remastered for Xbox One, including a handful of which are the best in the entire series. From mansions full of mutated monsters to cruise ships full of mutated monsters, here's our guide to the *Resi* series.



RESIDENT EVIL

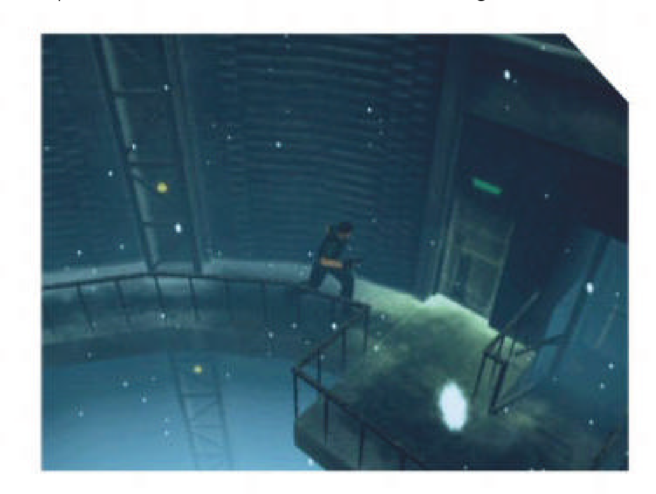
RELEASE DATE 2015

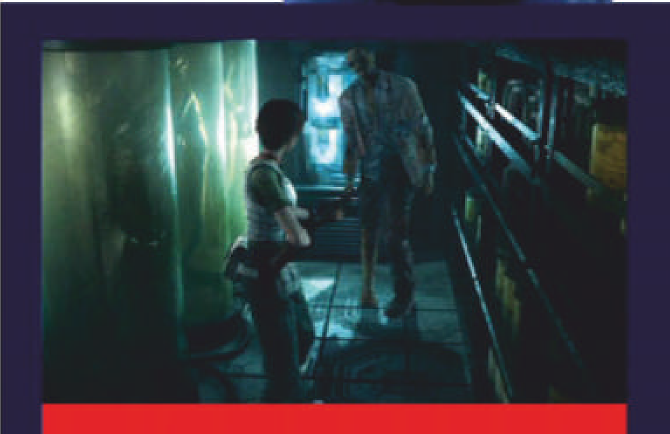
A 1080p update with some polish added to the backgrounds and textures was all the excuse we needed to reach for the original classic *Resident Evil* again, and return to the super-creepy Spencer Mansion with Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine. It's pretty much the 2002 GameCube re-release that's able to make the leap to our Xbox One, and it still works, being a tense, atmospheric puzzler with oh-so-limited resources, claustrophobic camera angles and a labyrinth packed with zombies, zombie dogs and mutated plants and insects, the first game is still a benchmark of survival horror.

RESIDENT EVIL CODE VERONICA X

RELEASE DATE 2011

The action moves to Antarctica, some months after the Raccoon City outbreak, as Claire Redfield, still searching for her S.T.A.R.S. bro, Chris, finds herself captured by Umbrella and imprisoned on an Antarctic island – where, unsurprisingly, there's an outbreak. Though upscaled to the Xbox 360, this one fares the least well. Stilted voice-acting and stiff animations are unfortunate reminders to take off those rose-tinted spectacles when it comes to old games.





RESIDENT EVIL ZERO

RELEASE DATE 2016

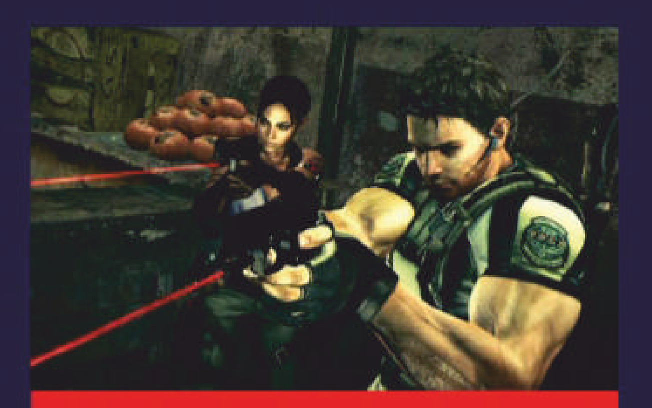
Giving this 2002 GameCube original an HD remaster for Xbox One sadly doesn't quite overcome the original's shortcomings. Namely, um, predictability and a generally forgettable setting and story. Still, it looks nice with its improved lighting and better textures, with the game's animations at least making it enjoyable enough for current-gen *Resi* fans. The game is a prequel to the original game and features the ever-so-slightly annoying Rebecca Chambers exploring an abandoned Umbrella training facility.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

RELEASE DATE 2016

The first of the *Resident Evil* games to switch the perspective to an over-the-shoulder view now so familiar to series fans. It starred *Resi 2*'s Leon S Kennedy, searching for the President's daughter in a creepy part of Spain they don't sell you in travel brochures. The genuinely disturbing hordes of parasitically infected locals, being controlled by an evil cult called the Los Illuminati, and introduction of those relentless, metal-headed Garrador freaks, make this one of the series' most imaginative outings. One of the most influential games of the noughties, it looks great ported to XO.





RESIDENT EVIL 5

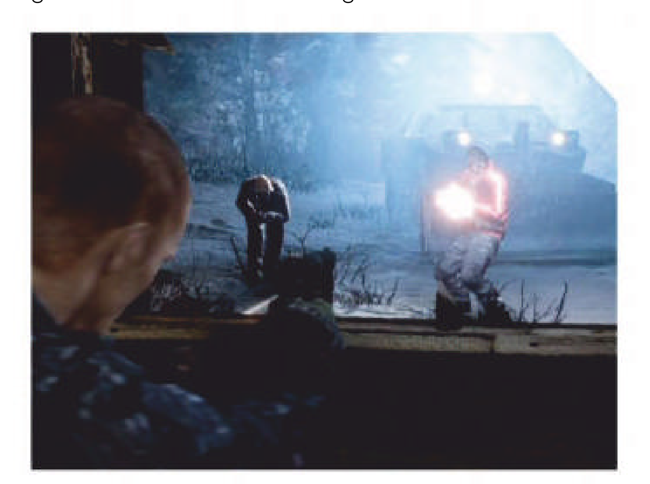
RELEASE DATE 2009/2016

This African-set Chris Redfield adventure introduced a voodoo-style zombie threat – though again caused by the Las Plagas virus that caused all that trouble in *Resident Evil 4*. Chris, now an agent for the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance (BSAA), and his new partner Sheva Alomar, shoot their way through hordes of undead in a much more action-focused game than previously. As such it's a great co-op game and, though purists would argue it's less about the survival, or the horror, and more about the shooter, thanks to a nifty remaster for Xbox One it's still a lot of fun to play.

RESIDENT EVIL 6

RELEASE DATE 2012

Following on from *5*, this one again has a heavy emphasis on co-op play – with the possibility of up to four playing at once – although you can play single player with an AI companion, or 'Lone Wolf' it without. Series favourites Chris, Leon and Ada return for a plot that's inconsistent but does throw up some great moments. The action is really ramped up for this one, and this is a smart port to the Xbox One. Though it may have lost some of its horror, and indeed, survival credentials, you have to give it its due as a great, cinematic action game.





RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY

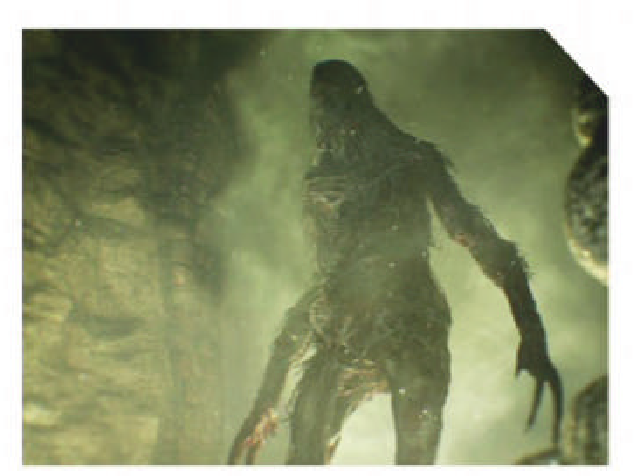
RELEASE DATE 2012

Almost as bizarre an experiment as anything cooked up by Umbrella, this off-shoot team shooter is non-canon and all the more odd for it. *Operation Raccoon City* isn't a bad premise, and it actually has you playing as an Umbrella Security Service squad, sent to collect T-Virus samples from the Racoon City mess. Sadly though, poor team and enemy AI stop the game from achieving its potential, despite a wealth of multiplayer modes and its being set in our beloved *Resident Evil* universe.

RESIDENT EVIL 7

RELEASE DATE 2017

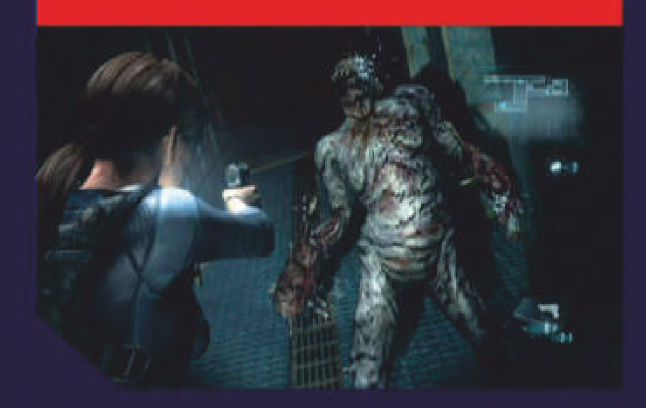
If the gameplay in *Resi*'s *5* and *6* had gone for more all-out action, with number seven, Capcom returned to the series' intense survival horror roots. This refocusing, and switch to first-person perspective, may have meant abandoning the games' old-school charm, but it did give us a genuinely terrifying gaming experience. With this one the player was dropped slap bang into *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* cannibal hillbilly territory – and that was just the beginning of bad dreams that a year on, frankly, haven't subsided.



RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS

RELEASE DATE 2013/2015

This hand-held original set aboard a huge ocean liner made the leap first to Xbox 360 and then to Xbox One; with the latter getting enough polish to make its ship interiors – either luxurious or dingy and damp – look great. Character models too are best on the XO version, while Jill Valentine's story is charmingly old-school *Resi* but nonetheless engaging, with some slightly more blobby monsters thriving on sea water and bodily fluids. Best part is the brilliant Raid Mode – timed survival, co-op or single player – through the game's various levels.





RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS 2

RELEASE DATE 2015

Presented in episodic form, with Claire Redfield and Barry Burton from the original games as its stars. Beautifully paced and compelling enough in its story to keep you hooked, it's atmospheric and dramatic, with some thoughtful game mechanics to the puzzling and exploration. A fully comprehensive Raid Mode, featuring tons of levels, unlockable characters and must-get rewards is the real star here, adding longevity to the game and making it one of our favourites.



THE REALITY OF FICTION

We dive head first into the narrative abyss of the videogame writing world and emerge triumphant with all the details you need to get into the game

ADAM BRYANT

Game development can seem like a mystery to anybody outside the industry. But of all the disciplines involved, writing is possibly the most misunderstood and under-appreciated. Videogames writing can be best described as an enigma, wrapped up in a riddle, encased in the mind of someone who we're told is sane but shows clear signs of madness, and keeps banging on about a princess being in another castle.

Fear not, for **OXM** is hot on the case and this month we had a chat with some of the best talent in the business. Writers Rhianna Pratchett, Anna Megill, Jakub Szamałek and JT Petty were all ready to lift the veil and explore their mysterious world with us.



The first thing to clear up would be what a videogame writer actually does. "In general [writing for games] involves working on a game's narrative components such as story, dialogue, characters and world building," explains Rhianna Pratchett. "It can also involve other elements such as environmental storytelling, narrative mechanics, voice directing, marketing and PR."

"It depends on the project and the role," says Anna Megill. "I might write screenplays and dialogue, or focus on narrative design and integration with other game elements. I coordinate with other teams to make sure that our work flows together. Collaboration is critical. I also write dialogue, trailers, and lore documentation like story bibles."

Writing for games has come a long way, but it's only been in the past ten years that the games industry has recognised the value of dedicated writers. "It's actually emerged as its own discipline now," says Pratchett. "There are many more professional game writers around these days. There are awards for game writing and summits dedicated to the craft. It's taken much more seriously."

"When I first started out in the industry, there weren't game writers the way there are now," says Megill. "I'd say, 'I want to be a games writer!' and someone would respond in a patronising tone, 'I think you mean game





ABOVE Rhianna Pratchett (left) created a more believable and authentic Lara.

RIGHT Anna Megill brought even more life to *Dishonored*'s no-nonsense Billie Lurk.

"It's only been in the past decade that the industry has recognised the value of dedicated writers"

designer.' It was frustrating, but that was reality back then. It's only been in the past decade that the industry has recognised the value of dedicated writers."

Immortal prose

Being that dedicated writers are relatively new to the world of videogames there isn't a completely defined process but there is a general flow of how the job is done. "You start with an idea for the game, its basic features and story," explains Megill. "Then you build the world, decide who's in it and what they're like, then map out the story. You work with other teams to determine core narrative design elements and once those have been agreed on, you can start crafting the story. You'll write side quests and optional content as you go along. You'll do all of this while important story elements get scoped out of existence or reworked, gameplay features get cut. Then you publish the game, and everyone either collapses or rolls onto DLC."

Another reason for there not being a standard process is that writing for games is a completely different beast to writing for other industries. "You're constantly considering your audience when it comes to games," explains Pratchett. "With most other entertainment mediums you're passively absorbing the story, but with games you're driving the story, the story is happening because of you. You *are* the story. You're also continually trying to balance the needs of gameplay with the needs of narrative, which rarely neatly align."

"Game writing is collaborative," says Megill. "You have far less control than you would have with a novel. The churn of iteration can be brutal. It's not just 'kill your darlings' in the games industry, it's 'watch the slaughter of your darlings'. Additionally, you have to think of narrative in a modular way sometimes, as players can progress through your story in a non-linear fashion and completely ruin the emotion you were building."

"Interactivity is the critical difference, though," continues Megill. "Screenplays and movie scripts need only entertain, but game writing has to instruct, as well. You have to show players *how* to reach the next step of your story. And, of course, the trick is to entertain while instructing."



One of the writing roles that pop up with increased frequency is narrative designer, and they have a slightly different job. "Broadly, a narrative designer has one foot in the design camp and one foot in the narrative camp," explains Pratchett. "They usually come from a design background and have decided to specialise in narrative, rather than, say, mechanics or level design. Writers are more concerned with the traditional aspects of narrative (plot, dialogue, characters etc) whereas narrative designers will be more focused on the ways in which the narrative unfolds during the game and how players











ABOVE These Envisioned don't want to stab you to death, they just want to shake hands.

OPPOSITE Geralt is never too far from his trusty steed, Roach.

experience it. Narrative designers and writers usually work hand-in-hand and some span both disciplines."

"There's no industry standard for the roles. The disciplines overlap a lot," explains Megill. "A narrative designer and game writer can perform the exact same work, only be called something different by different studios."

Character building

However, despite the increased prominence of writers within games there are still plenty of misconceptions, and people who think that writing doesn't matter. "Paraphrasing what [id Software founder] John Carmack once said, I think many people still share the sentiment that a story in a game is like a story in an adult movie, it's expected to be there, but not much beyond that," says Jakub Szamałek. "It's a sentiment that I'd like to challenge."

"One of the big ones is that writers are the equivalent of film directors and have absolute control over everything the narrative touches," says Pratchett. "That is rarely the case unless the writer is also the game director. In reality, writers work in a small team. Given the fact that so many people consider themselves to be writers it means that narrative can become quite a crowded battlefield."

Thankfully, this is something that is changing and as technology improves, so too will the amount of opportunities and ways in which to tell those stories. Writers are already looking ahead. "I think that non-verbal storytelling will play a greater role in the future," says Szamałek. "In *The Witcher 2*, our mimics and gesture system was fairly rudimentary. Our characters only had a couple of emotional states, so instead of showing the player how they feel, they had to convey it with words, which isn't necessarily how human beings behave. In *The Witcher 3*, we could show much more with gestures, furtive glances, eye rolls, and so on. I can't wait to see what the future will bring."

"We'll see more writers and narrative designers becoming game directors or creative directors and getting more hard power on teams," says Pratchett. "More companies will start using professional writers as standard, and involving them earlier in the development process. As an industry we'll start improving our narrative literacy and becoming bolder and braver with our stories."

"I'm fascinated by VR and the challenge of writing for something that feels so real," says Megill. "Writing for games now means trying to pull the maximum emotional response from players through a 2D experience. But from what I've seen, we might have to pull back on eliciting emotion because it's built into the realism of the VR experience. Have you seen the videos where people are playing survival horror games in VR? It's so real for them, they get so terrified. Not exactly the reaction I want as a writer."

Things still aren't perfect though and a lot of mistakes are still made, not just by the writers themselves but by development teams, too. "Writers are often hired too late in the development process," says Pratchett. "It's what I call being a narrative paramedic. Writers can often find themselves in 'story by committee' situations where their skills are being under-valued and under-used."

"You don't have to describe everything that's happening," says Megill, "not if other disciplines are doing good work. Let the environment and gameplay do some heavy lifting for you. I once read a scene where the player character said, 'It's quiet here. Not much going on,' as they walked down a quiet, empty hallway. Why say that? Especially out loud? Trust players to look at the world and draw that conclusion themselves."

> "We ought to be designing responsibly, considering how deep a game can get in your head"

"I'm almost always disengaged by cinematics," says JT Petty. "Because the player doesn't have control, there's less tension when a cinematic begins, which is the worst time to be getting your story across."

The ongoing debate seems to be that given games have a huge reach and influence, many believe writing for them should have a higher purpose.

"It's okay for games simply to be what they are," admits Megill. "Just like movies or books,



they don't all have to be masterpieces. I love that there's a range of experiences for people to enjoy. For me personally, however, I'm very conscious of the ideas I'm promoting as a creator. I'd never work on a game that was irredeemably hate-filled and horrifying, but I'd never tell someone else not to work on it. But not every game needs to serve a higher purpose. If you want to make a game about popping bubble wrap just because 'it's fun', then heck yeah! Go for it."

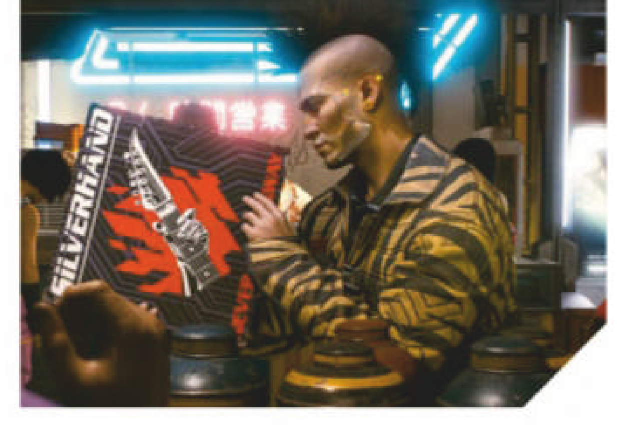
"Absolutely," says Petty. "At their best, games are these hypnotic, physical and emotional experiences that people are going to spend dozens of hours inside. We ought to be designing responsibly, considering how deep a game can get in your head."

Gospel truth

But what does it take to be a successful games writer? "Anyone can do it if they develop the right skillset, work ethic and keep practising their craft," say Pratchett. "Working in the industry is much harder than it looks from the outside. I certainly underestimated how tough it would be. A good game writer is someone with a flair for narrative, who understands games, can work well in a team and under pressure, is flexible, adaptable and knows which battles are worth fighting."

"It's probably a strange mixture of humility and over-confidence," says Petty. "You need to know you're not the centre of this creative process, but still feel certain that the few lines of description you dash off is worth the months of work a team of artists and programmers will spend building it."

With that being said, here's some parting advice for those that wish to get into this world for themselves. "Read a lot, write a lot,"



says Szamałek. "Tinker with game editors. Play videogames critically - think hard why you like the writing in some games and dislike it in others. Then apply for jobs and, most importantly, don't give up!"

"Play lots of games, cross-genre, indie to AAA," says Pratchett. "Come to understand all the different ways narrative is used. Particularly in the areas which are unique to games. Keep practising your writing, take classes, courses, workshops. A writer writes."

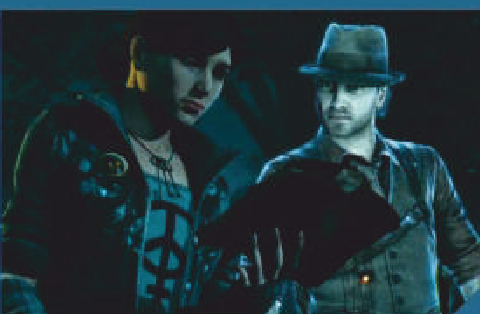
"Network! Network your ass off," says Megill. "Get on Twitter. Talk to other game writers. Go to cons. Meet people in the industry. That's how you'll get jobs. But also, be realistic. Game writing is an incredibly competitive field. There are hundreds of thousands of people competing for, at best, a few hundred roles."

Sadly, writers for games are less well known than game directors, designers or composers and as a result they don't get as much recognition as they deserve. But you can change that. "I'd like to ask your readers for a favour," says Szamałek. "If you have a favourite game story, check the credits, see who wrote it, and if you feel like it – reach out to them, show your appreciation. They will be thrilled, trust me." ■

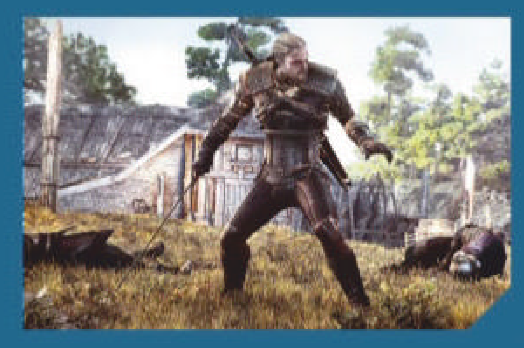
ORIGIN STORIES

HOW THESE GREAT WRITERS GOT INTO THE BIZ AND THE GAMES THEY MADE

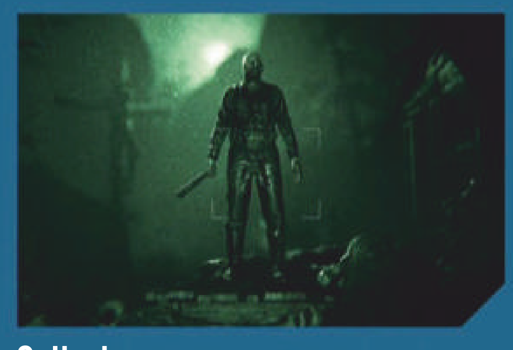
Tomb Raider – RHIANNA PRATCHETT
Rhianna started as a games journalist, even writing for **OXM**, but worked her way into writing for games including the *Tomb Raider* reboot and *Mirror's Edge*.

Murdered: Soul Suspect – ANNA MEGILL
Anna began in QA (quality assurance) but climbed the ranks to co-write *Murdered: Soul Suspect* for Square Enix and recently finished work on *Control* for Remedy.



The Witcher 3 – JAKUB SZAMAŁEK
Jakub was doing a PHD in classical archaeology but decided writing was for him. After publishing his own book he successfully applied for a job at CDPR.

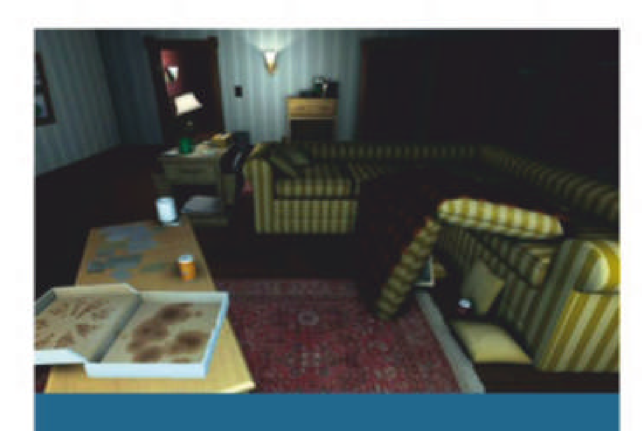


Outlast – TJ PETTY
While looking into a receptionist job at Ubisoft, Petty spotted applications for scriptwriters and went for that instead. He wrote the story for the *Outlast* games.

Once upon a time on Xbox

FEAST YOUR EYES ON SOME OF THE BEST NARRATIVE MASTERPIECES FROM XBOX HISTORY

Videogames have become more complex, but so too have their stories, and Xbox has always been a home to some of the best stories around. Whether it's to thrill, surprise, frighten, laugh, or to bring on a flood of tears, Xbox has something for everyone and we thought we'd share some of our favourites with you. It was difficult to compile this list simply because there are far too many amazing and engrossing stories to choose from, so take the ordering with a pinch of salt. Don't worry, each of the games we've selected deserves to be there. We've also specifically not included any of the games that our interviewees have worked on so as to showcase some other great titles.



08
GONE HOME

FORMAT XBOX ONE | RELEASE 2016

You don't need the big bucks to make a game with a fantastic story, as *Gone Home* so perfectly proved. In this first-person walking simulator you play as Katie Greenbriar. In 1995 Katie returns home after some time away to find the place deserted. Her family is nowhere to be found and with no immediate guidance you're left to explore. This is where the beauty of the game lies. By wandering around, finding notes and items, you discover all sorts of things about your family. It approaches subjects such as infidelity, abuse, love and sexuality, all of which are rarely approached in games.

07
BIOSHOCK

FORMAT XBOX 360 | RELEASE 2007

When it comes to narrative in videogames this list would be amiss if it didn't include *BioShock*. It contains one of the most successful plot twists in games and blew many a gamer's mind. For years friends would scream out "you've got to play *BioShock*", followed by "make sure you play it before someone spoils it for you". It was so well done that players were none the wiser right up to the point of the reveal. Developers now will have an incredibly hard time pulling off the same trick again because players are wise to anyone repeatedly using the same phrases. Now, if you don't already, would you kindly subscribe to this magazine?

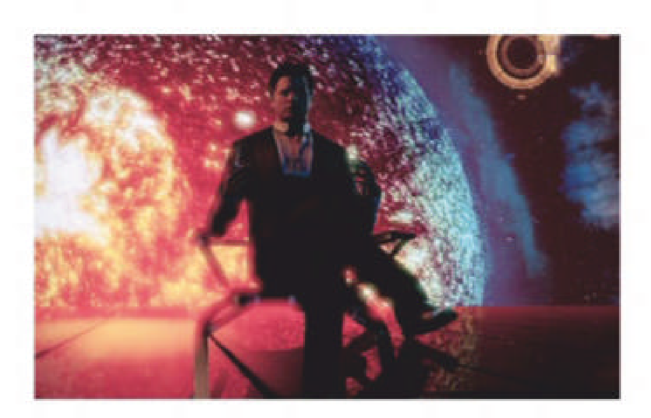


06
INSIDE

FORMAT XBOX ONE | RELEASE 2016

Playdead is a master at telling stories. Both *Inside* and its previous game, *Limbo*, tell their stories without a single piece of dialogue. Instead they rely on superb environmental design and the player's interaction with said environment to get their story across. In the case of *Inside*, when the story concludes you're left with a mixture of feelings and unsure as to what the hell just happened. Then you start to question your role as a player within it. So few games understand how to do environmental storytelling well, but *Inside* is possibly the best example.





05
MASS EFFECT 2

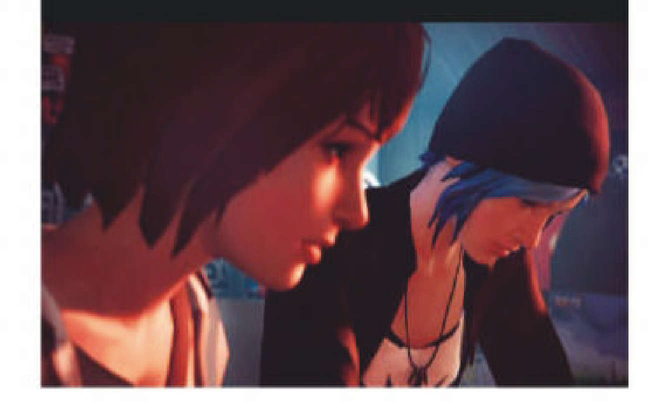
FORMAT XBOX 360 | RELEASE 2010

Drew Karpyshyn has had a hand in the success of many of Bioware's games like *Baldur's Gate* and *Knights Of The Old Republic, as well* as the first two *Mass Effect* games, the second of which many consider to be the best in the franchise. The reason the second game is better than the first is because it focuses more on character, rather than plot. Of course those elements go hand in hand but the game feels more personal because of it. You really get invested with not just the characters you already know but with pretty much all of the new ones, too. And given that there's at least 13 of them, that's no small feat.

04
LIFE IS STRANGE

FORMAT XBOX 360 | RELEASE 2015

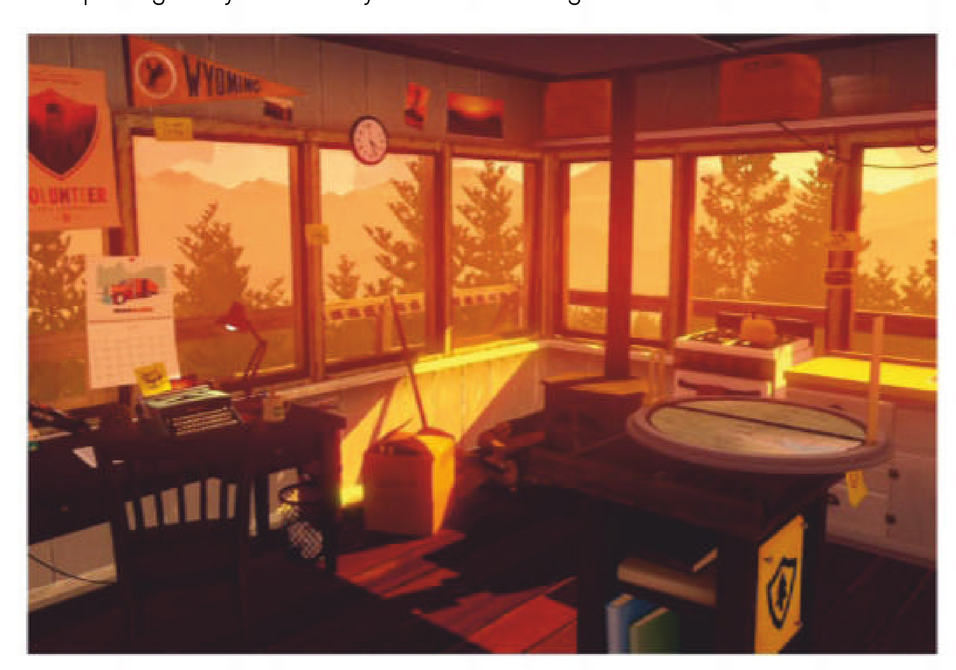
This is another title that focuses on character. The relationship between protagonist Max and her best friend Chloe is a touching and heartfelt one. The whole idea that Max has the ability to manipulate time doesn't seem all that important in the grand scheme of things. The game has some cheesy dialogue at times but it makes up for it by being so well-observed. All your decisions have an emotional weight, right up to the final moments where you're forced to make a tough choice. This wouldn't be so poignant if the developers hadn't already done the narrative legwork.



03
FIREWATCH

FORMAT XBOX ONE | **RELEASE** 2016

Firewatch introduces you to the main character through a simple text adventure but within five minutes you become completely emotionally attached to him. Having such a close connection to the protagonist from the start makes all of your choices throughout more considered. The story is unveiled through walkie-talkie conversations with a fellow fire lookout, who you never actually meet during the game. To tell such a compelling story in this way is reason enough to make this list.



02
THE WALKING DEAD

FORMAT XBOX 360 | **RELEASE** 2012

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* will go down as one of the best character-driven games ever made. Through the course of five intense episodes the relationship between the main character, Lee, and the young girl he's sworn to protect, Clementine, grows in a believable way. Initial distrust and caution, on the part of Clementine, gives way to reliance and complete trust, but more importantly friendship. Which is why the ending is so gut-wrenching. Preparing Clementine for an unknown and dangerous future becomes a personal goal for the player. Without spoiling the ending for those that haven't actually played it yet, it's safe to say that the conclusion of the game will live with you for a long time.



01
RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

FORMAT XBOX ONE | **RELEASE** 2018

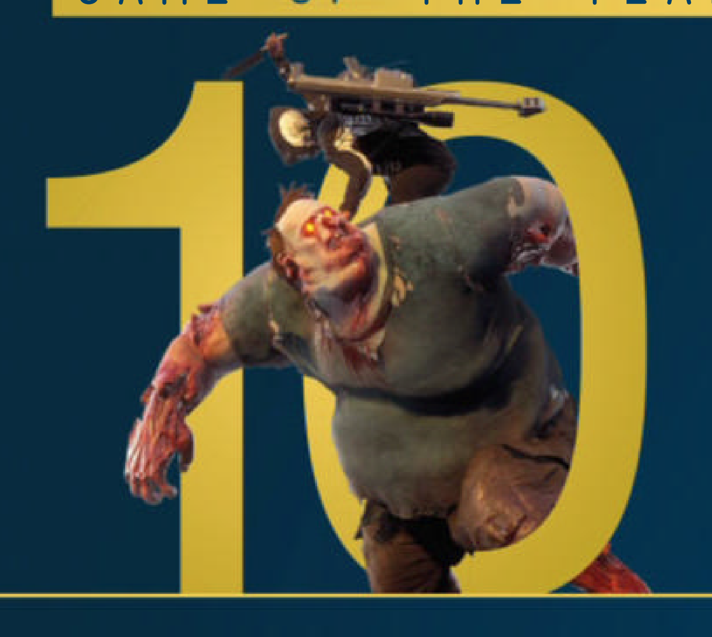
The list would have been very different a few months ago. But *Red Dead Redemption II* rode in on Rockstar's steely narrative horse and knocked us all down, shooting its way straight to the top of the list. Not only is the story one of the most compelling that Rockstar has ever done, and lines up neatly with the events of the previous game without it feeling forced, but everything around it is completely superb. Every single interaction feels unique and real and makes the world, and subsequently the story, come alive. The smallest of details, like how people will react differently depending on how you look, how you smell, or what deeds you've done, culminate in something truly special. Even the expert lighting sets the mood wonderfully. For a long time people will be analysing individual elements and emulating the things that are in *Red Dead Redemption II*, and rightly so. ■



Game of the Year Awards 2018

Y X B A

What a year it's been, readers – perhaps the strongest year in Xbox One history. We've travelled back in time to Ancient Greece and the Wild West of America. Driven around the UK while taking in all the seasons, fought demons real and personal, and survived a zombie apocalypse. Again. We've seen videogames capture the zeitgeist and enter the public consciousness like never before. And we've never uttered the words 'Battle' and 'Royale' quite so many times. The Xbox One X has made all of this look absolutely amazing, and even non Xbox gamers have to concede that games play better on Microsoft's console. Yes, it's been an incredible 12 months, so join us now as we celebrate the best of Xbox in 2018.







10

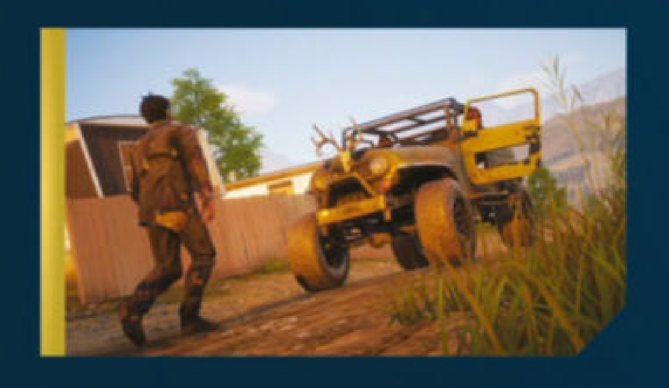
STATE OF DECAY 2

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / **DEVELOPER** UNDEAD LABS

Xbox-exclusive zombie survival horror

Despite a buggy start to its life, Undead Labs' Xbox-exclusive co-op survival horror game is one of the most atmospheric and ambitious zombie games going. Its harsh, roguelike approach makes your attempts to maintain and keep alive a community of survivors all the more harrowing.

There's some great zombie design, while a genuinely intelligent management meta-game adds to the fun you can have splitting dead skulls open with clubs and axes. As much fun as it is mowing down the undead in vehicles as you and your mates tear around one of three distinct maps, it's also a deeply engaging solo experience. As you build up your community, surviving human and zombie threats is both challenging and rewarding. Losing any one of your community is genuinely upsetting – each character, with their unique traits and personal needs leading to potential conflict within the group, adds another dimension to the usual zombie-slaying. Breaking down in the middle of nowhere surrounded by zombies is all the more terrifying given that death is so final, and you really feel like those scavenging runs are of vital importance, keeping you playing long into the night on any given session. A thoughtful game with depth and complexity that rewards your immersion.

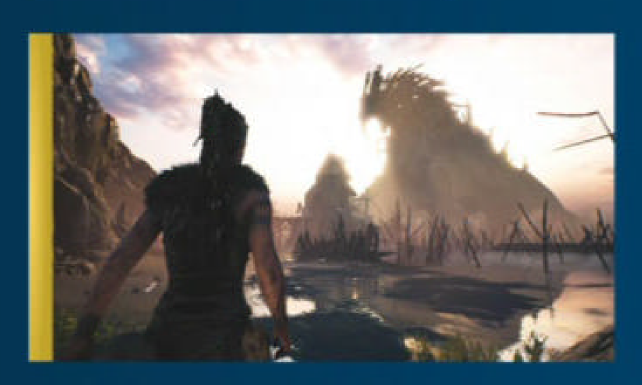


9

HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

PUBLISHER NINJA THEORY / **DEVELOPER** NINJA THEORY

Cracking hack'n'slash viking adventure



It's not very often that a game like this comes along. Ninja Theory's action-adventure game combined fluid hack and slash combat with a touching representation of mental illness. The voices in Senua's head, as she quests through Hell to save her lover Dillion, doubt her; they push her onwards, they laugh when she thinks she's making progress and only occasionally help.

Hellblade does its best to make you feel like you're alone in the world. All the voices in your head make it painfully obvious how little human support surrounds you, their hoarse screaming when you're fighting being the closest the game gets to a tutorial. But it works.

Simple controls and only a basic light and heavy attack give you the building blocks for creative and brutal combos, while a steep level of difficulty means no room for error, and eventually combat becomes a fluid, instinctive flurry of patterns that's second nature. With story-drenched puzzles to break up the intense hack-and-slashing, it all combines to make *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* a beautifully-paced exploration of mental illness and inner strength. As **OXM**'s reviewer noted, "if you don't join Senua in Hell you're missing out on one of the most thoughtful games available on the Xbox One".

8

BATTLEFIELD V

PUBLISHER EA / **DEVELOPER** DICE

War is hell, or in this case hellishlhy good

While the *Call Of Duty* games have tended to dominate this kind of FPS, EA's flagship battle games have always been the game of choice 'for those in the know'. The WW2-set *Battlefield V* is a very fine game, building impressively on the groundwork set by the excellent *Battlefield 1*.

With Spitfires and Messerschmitts roaring overhead, tanks rumbling around you and everything getting bombed into rubble, it's truly thrilling stuff. The game provides some long and involved skirmishes in impeccably designed maps. The single-player War Stories are fantastic, while the standout multiplayer mode at launch is Grand Operations, which takes place over three days. It gives you a real feeling of being part of a developing operation that plays out depending on how well you're fighting. A fourth-day Final Stand, should both sides be at a stalemate, is essentially battle royale with a shrinking map.

Our reviewer was mightily impressed, noting "you won't find a more harrowingly realistic and convincing emulation of what fighting in World War II would have been like". Before launch, EA and DICE promised more game modes than were present at launch, including the Tides of War mode – but the good news there is that it means there's plenty more to come in 2019.



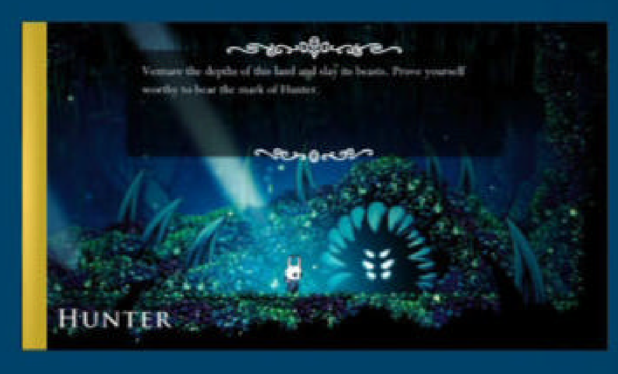




7 HOLLOW KNIGHT

PUBLISHER TEAM CHERRY / **DEVELOPER** TEAM CHERRY

A little game, with an even smaller hero



The best indie game of the year, for us – in spite of close competition from the wonderful *Dead Cells*. However, this enchanting and surreal 2D adventure that rewards exploration comes out top for us. *Hollow Knight* places you in the tiny boots of an unnamed insect knight in a world full of strange and wonderful creatures. The kingdom of Hallownest has fallen into ruin and is now crawling with monsters and reanimated insect husks, and it's up to you to explore this dangerous but intriguing subterranean world for yourself.

Its tactical combat, narrative and manner of exploration of its world respects the intelligence of the player, while it's challenging enough to please even *Dark Souls* fans.

On the face of it, *Hollow Knight* is a Metroidvania game, with unreachable locations that are only accessible once you've obtained the correct equipment or ability, but peek below its surface and it reveals itself to be much, much more. While the game does borrow heavily from many different games that have come before it, it's how it combines these elements and influences within, as our reviewer noted, "a mysterious alchemy of game design" – making it just, well, perfect.

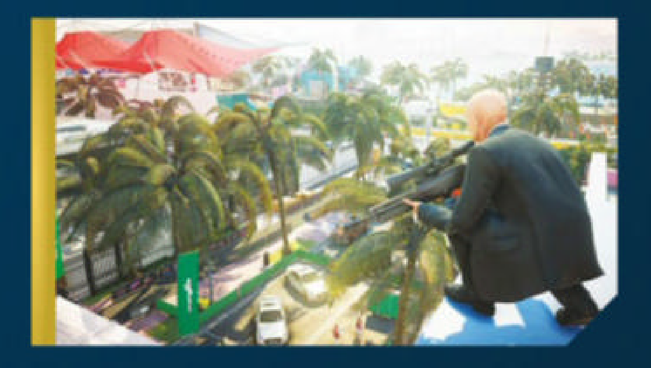
6 HITMAN 2

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE

Follicularly-challenged assassin returns

Agent 47 is back with his briefcase to follow the success of the episodic *Hitman* reboot from a couple of years ago, and what a comeback it is for ol' baldy. Levels are intricately designed and you could spend hours dissecting each one, discovering new opportunities and ways to carry out your hit. They're fantastically varied too, with sunny suburbs, a sprawling jungle level with a drug baron's compound and a Miami-set motor race level – each presenting an imaginative variety of ways to make your kill. There are challenges throughout based around sniping targets from half a mile away, as well as opportunities to get up-close and personal.

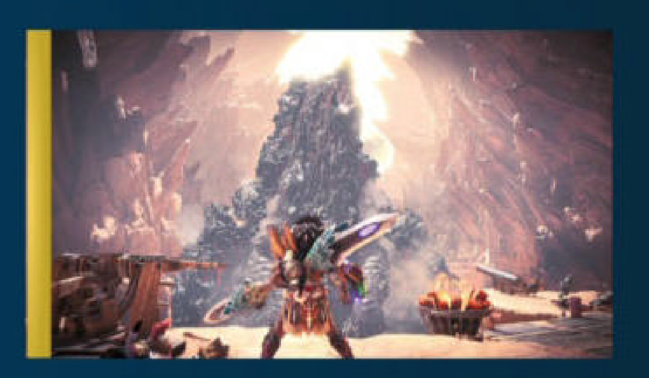
The levels are densely packed and full of life, like Mumbai, with its crowded streets, catwalks and bridges, sewers and catacombs – all fully populated with NPCs and with so much to explore, so many opportunities to be found and lots of carefully thought-out lines of sight. The AI is smart too. While disguises are a hugely fun part of setting up some hit opportunities, some of the game's NPCs know their colleagues' faces too well, presenting extra difficulty. We called it "a richly rewarding game, filled to bursting with things to do, constantly presenting new ways to play, and absolutely, positively the best *Hitman* ever". Yes, it's a hit!



5 MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

PUBLISHER CAPCOM / **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM

Capcom's creature feature comes to Xbox



Capcom's odd-ball beastie hunting RPG has been around for a while, but this is the first time it's come to Microsoft's console, and we've been loving it. For those who've never experienced the series' campy brand of dino slaughter, here's a typical session of *Monster Hunter World*. After creating a hunter with the game's awesomely exhaustive character creator, you head out into thick, humid jungles, prehistoric deserts and gloriously gaudy coral-strewn canyons with the goal of killing or capturing critters. You then have to scour the land for telltale signs of your target monster – footprints, claw marks on rocks – before you finally track down the furry, feathery or scaly culprit.

You then enter into a lengthy fight to best the beast. It's not all about the killing though, you'll get plenty of missions to study or non-lethally capture monsters for research purposes too. The game can feel daunting to newcomers, with some involved RPG elements, but its expansive world, beautiful visuals and elaborately animated monsters are wonderfully distracting and time spent with the game is truly rewarding. With an utterly convincing eco-system, in which you'll witness those dinos quite happily existing around you, *MHW* is, if you'll excuse the irony, captivating.







4

FORZA HORIZON 4

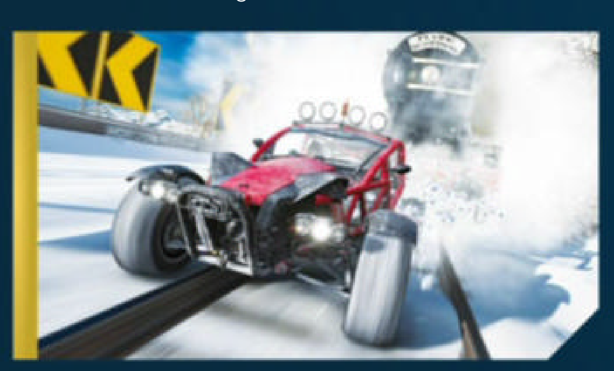
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / **DEVELOPER** PLAYGROUND GAMES

Truly exceptional Xbox-exclusive racer

If there's ever been a better driving game, we don't know what it is. Lush graphics, layers of polish and accessibility for all levels of gamer make this a real contender for game of this generation, never mind of 2018. Combining the fun of open-world racing – less serious and hardcore than the *Forza Motorsport* series – with online or offline competitive racing and petrol-head levels of handling accuracy (plus a huge variety of vehicles), this game has everything. We love that it's set in the UK too, with seasonal changes (no, it's not all rain), making the experience of tearing round, free-play, or engaging in its huge variety of challenges and races, an absolutely scintillating experience.

Jump in a rally monster, leave your viewpoint on the bonnet or in the cockpit and you'll feel the pressure of weaving a rally car through a forest. Pilot a hypercar at insane speeds down a freeway, or just spend your time tootling around the map in a convertible admiring the landscape.

Our reviewer described *Forza Horizon 4* as "an ode to racing games that successfully infuses the social DNA of MMOs into its racer, while never skimping on the handling model that makes their games so damned tactile".

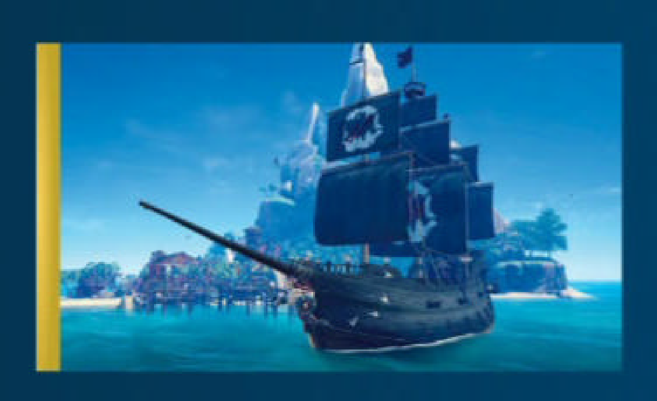


3

SEA OF THIEVES

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / **DEVELOPER** RARE

Aaarrr third top game of the year is…



Rare's open-world online multiplayer pirate spectacular is a triumph of game design that is frequently amazing, and has kept on improving with each successive update. At its core, the game embraces the chaos of a pirate's life on the salty seas – be a pirate (an ugly one, accept it), find treasure, go on adventures and do a lot of sailing. That's about it, but really, what more do you need from a pirate game?

Initially these seas of thieves felt a little, well, empty. It takes a long time to sail in 'real time' between the map's many islands, but those seas are nevertheless beautiful and enticing as you sail around solo in a sloop or in a crew aboard a galleon, digging up treasure and delivering chickens. It still depends on having good friends to play it with consistently; being thrown in with strangers is not as rewarding – and on your own it can feel a little lonely. It has admittedly divided the Xbox community for all of the above reasons, but fans of the game who have kept at it have undoubtedly been rewarded for their time (and frequent loss of ships, condemned by other pirates to Davy Jones' locker) with cracking updates like Forsaken Shores bringing ever more joy to your jolly sailors bold.

2

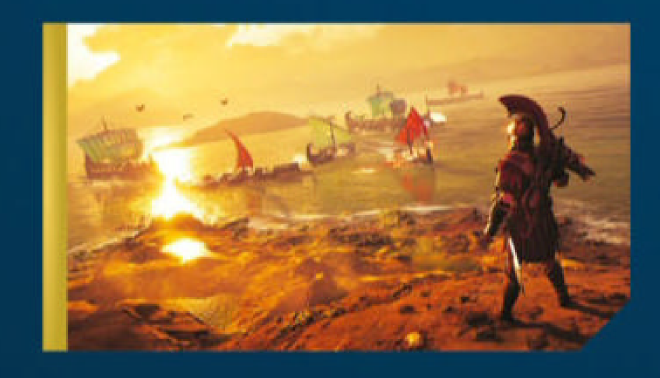
ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

PUBLISHER UBISOFT / **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT

It's all Greek to us… a superb open-world RPG

If we thought last year's *Origins* couldn't be topped, the latest Assassin's Creed just a year later has impressed us mightily with its foray into Ancient Greece, and yet further into open-world RPG territory. Not only is its map vast, its visuals beautiful and captivatingly authentic, but it has utterly engaged us with deep storytelling, wonderfully drawn characters and a plethora of missions and activities that could keep us playing until the next *Assassin's Creed*. And that's another two years off.

Kassandra's, or Alexios's, story allows for both a fluid and open style of preferred play but also at its core contains a wonderful tale of revenge against an all-controlling cult responsible for his or her traumatic childhood events. Slick and intuitive combat, free-running fluidity, assassin-sneaking, ship combat, horse-riding, exploring and puzzling – it all adds up to an impressive though never over-reaching experience. *Origins* may have innovated much of what you can do in *Odyssey*, but this simply gets everything right. NPC encounters are richly rewarding, while the narrative branching does enough to make you feel as though you're making your own adventure. And Spartan-kicking enemies off cliffs will never, ever get boring.





RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES / **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR GAMES

Another cowboy classic from Rockstar Games

Rockstar has done it again, delivering in spades despite the sky-high expectations on a follow-up to its still brilliant 2010 Western game. While nods to classic Westerns are still in evidence, the narrative and setting somehow manage to avoid the obvious, while mining a fertile mythology of the old West and placing you convincingly in a world that is authentic and genuinely immersive. Arthur Morgan's outlaw persona is yours to play around with, as you choose to play as a bad-ass or a big softie at heart, caught up in the evolving history of America and finding his place within a gang of likeable outlaws. There are so many great characters, from the members of Dutch's gang to random strangers you meet out in the world, that playing the game is never short of a joy. The pithy dialogue and sharp scripting that arises from these encounters lives up to expectations of a Rockstar game, while just from a purely sandbox perspective, there's so much to do in Arthur's world that hours and hours of rewarding gameplay can be had without even touching the main story missions. Those story missions themselves are brilliantly paced – as our reviewer noted, "When it comes to stellar triple-A storytelling, *Red Dead Redemption II* sets scintillating new standards."

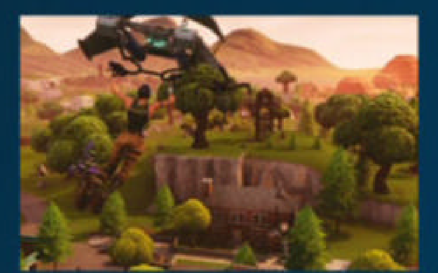
Every part of the gameplay mechanics impresses too – from the detailed horse physics and behaviour to the wealth of guns and superb combat, with crafting and customisation and the meta-game of camp management merely the icing on the cake.

Truly a once-in-a-console-generation game, this is videogames as culturally significant art. But more than that, it's a whole heap of cowboy-caper fun.

BEST COMPETITIVE GAME

In a year where online gaming really took off, the best of those games face-off

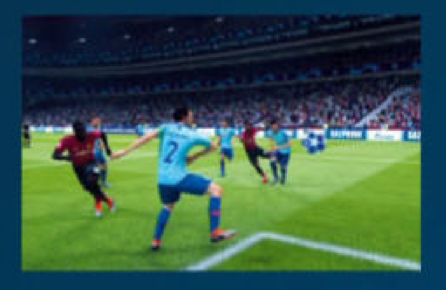
1 FORTNITE



The game that most captured 2018's gamer zeitgeist. The free-to-play Battle Royale is not only brilliant, it's had game publishers scrabbling to put a BR mode into their own games.

PUB EPIC GAMES / **DEV** EPIC GAMES

2 FIFA 19



The best football game this year, with improvements to the actual in-match gameplay finally equalling its wealth of modes. And of course there are those all-important licences to consider too.

PUB EA / **DEV** EA

3 LASER LEAGUE



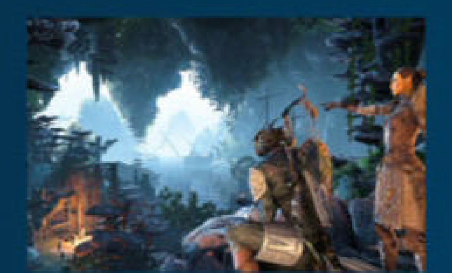
It's a neon-lit, top-down sports simulator that pits two teams in a series of game modes where you use laser nodes to create walls of coloured death. It's *Tron* with a splash of *NFL Blitz*, and it's fab.

PUB 505 / **DEV** ROLL7

BEST DLC

The best individual updates of the year

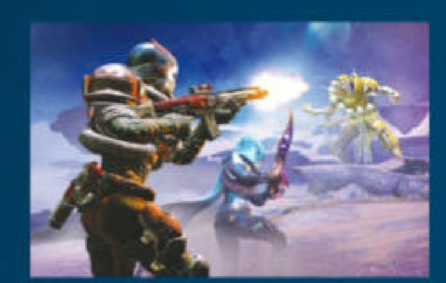
1 ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: SUMMERSET



The MMORPG keeps giving thanks to superb, meaty expansions like this one. Tons of new quests and a vibrant new land of Elves and Gryfons really added magic to the world of Tamriel.

PUB BETHESDA / **DEV** BETHESDA

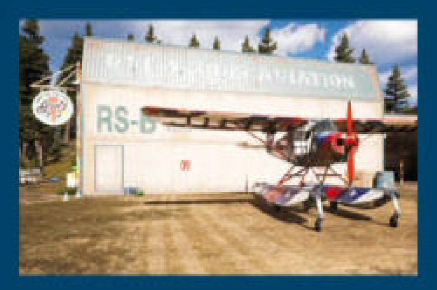
2 DESTINY 2: FORSAKEN



Bungie's FPS is terrific, and this major expansion saw your Guardian avenging the death of Cayde-6 in a full campaign with new multiplayer Strike missions and a new competitive Crucible mode.

PUB ACTIVISION / **DEV** BUNGIE

3 FAR CRY 5



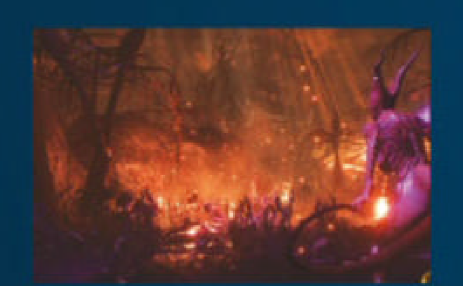
Ubisoft's slightly po-faced FPS narrowly missed out on the top list here, but its ingeniously imaginative DLC made the purchase of a season pass essential. Stuntmen, Martians and Vietnam all featured.

PUB UBISOFT / **DEV** UBISOFT

WORST GAME

We'd love to say that all games are brilliant. But, clearly, they're not...

1 AGONY



A sludgy, plodding and genuinely unpleasant game filled with scenes of child murder and sexual assault. As hideously awful as that already sounds, the real agony came from actually playing the damn thing.

PUB PLAYWAY / **DEV** MADMIND STUDIOS

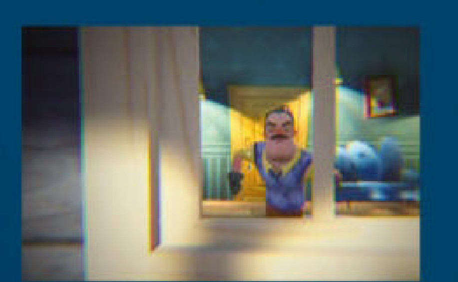
2 PAST CURE



We couldn't find enough bad words to say about this indie survival horror game with grand but unachieved ambitions. "*Max Payne* suffering from senile dementia." Ow.

PUB PHANTOM 8 STUDIO / **DEV** PHANTOM 8 STUDIO

3 HELLO NEIGHBOR



Frustrating enemy AI, horrible controls and game-breaking bugs led our reviewer to advise, "Avoid it like you would a weird neighbour wandering around with murderer gloves on."

PUB TINYBUILD / **DEV** DYNAMIC PIXELS

READERS' CHOICE

Your favourite 2018 games as voted for on social media

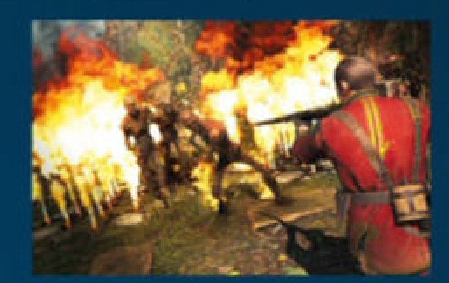
1 Red Dead Redemption II
2 Forza Horizon 4
3 Fortnite
4 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
5 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
6 Sea Of Thieves
7 Shadow Of The Tomb Raider
8 Hitman 2
9 FIFA 19
10 Battlefield V



BEST CO-OPERATIVE GAME

Sometimes it's just better to play together…

1 STRANGE BRIGADE



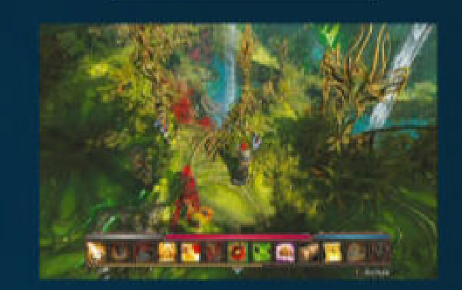
Rebellion's quirky, old-fashioned third person shooter proved that working together to solve puzzles, shoot monsters and collect power-ups was still a great way to spend hours of your time. Tally-ho, chaps!
PUB REBELLION / **DEV** REBELLION

2 OVERCOOKED 2



A cracking little indie sequel involving working together to cook up orders in your sushi, burrito, pizza or burger restaurant. Added complications, like the kitchen being on fire, add to the chaos.
PUB TEAM17 / **DEV** GHOST TOWN GAMES

3 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

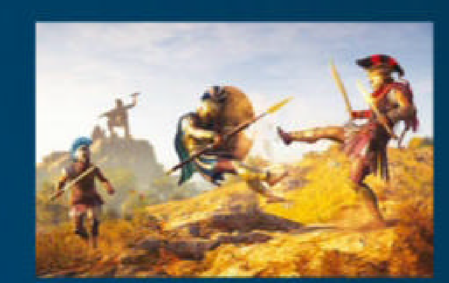


A deep RPG full of endless choices. Working together in your group, playing to your individual strengths, is what makes this game really come to as couch co-op or online.
PUB BANDAI NAMCO / **DEV** LARIAN GAMES

BEST STORY

Gaming's about more than just pressing X, as these games prove

1 ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY



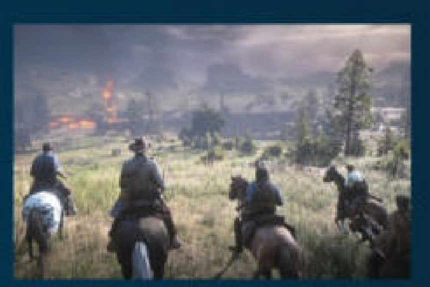
A tale of separated siblings and revenge against a shadowy cult that wronged them. There's so much to do in the game that you can, and will, take the story at your own pace, and make it your own.
PUB UBISOFT / **DEV** UBISOFT

2 HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE



Sensitively and intriguingly tackling mental illness while fleshing out what is essentially a hack'n'slash game is a mark of great narrative design. We love Senua's story, and we feel her pain.
PUB NINJA THEORY / **DEV** NINJA THEORY

3 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

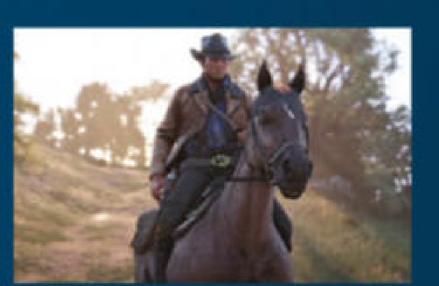


Arthur Morgan may be the central character here but it's the story of Dutch's gang as a whole that impresses. The backdrop of one of the last outlaw gangs fighting the reach of law and order is amazing.
PUB ROCKSTAR / **DEV** ROCKSTAR

BEST CHARACTER

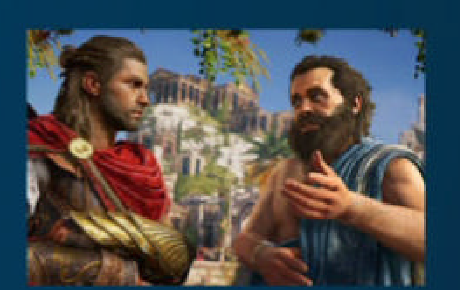
The heroes and NPCs that made our gaming lives better

1 ARTHUR MORGAN
RED DEAD REDEMPTION II



Despite his 'everyman' qualities, and a wealth of brilliantly imagined characters around him, Arthur's cynical wit and hilarious put-downs of the various oddballs and idiots he encounters is priceless.
PUB ROCKSTAR / **DEV** ROCKSTAR

2 SOKRATES
ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY



There are plenty of interesting characters to engage with, but none are quite so fun and frequently baffling as the philosopher, who will suck you into a debate about the meaning of, well *anything at all*.
PUB UBISOFT / **DEV** UBISOFT

3 PALICO
MONSTER HUNTER WORLD



While you're off hunting you're followed around by a cute kitty companion who isn't as cute as he looks if you need help subduing a big iguana. We made our kitty look like a Skeletor cosplayer. Aww.
PUB CAPCOM / **DEV** CAPCOM

OXM TEAM CHOICE

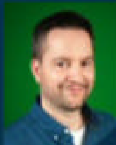
The team's top pick of the year!



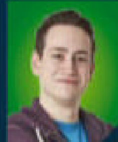
Chris Burke
Red Dead Redemption II
It's really got to be *Red Dead II*. Great dialogue, engaging story, gameplay, everything. It all just works so well. Sorry, everything else!



Adam Bryant
Hollow Knight
I almost couldn't stop playing this game, and when I did, it's all I'd think about. Everything from its art, game design and soundtrack is superb.



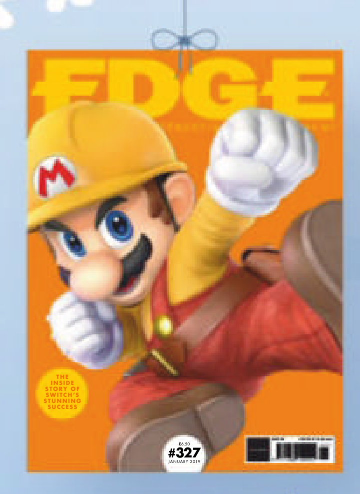
Warren Brown
Red Dead Redemption II
I've certainly played a ton of online multiplayer games like *Fortnite* BR and *Sea Of Thieves*, but ultimately it's *RDRII* that gets my vote!



Robin Valentine
Monster Hunter World
Nothing beats the satisfaction of bringing down a big horrible dinosaur with your mates – and turning its skin into a hat.

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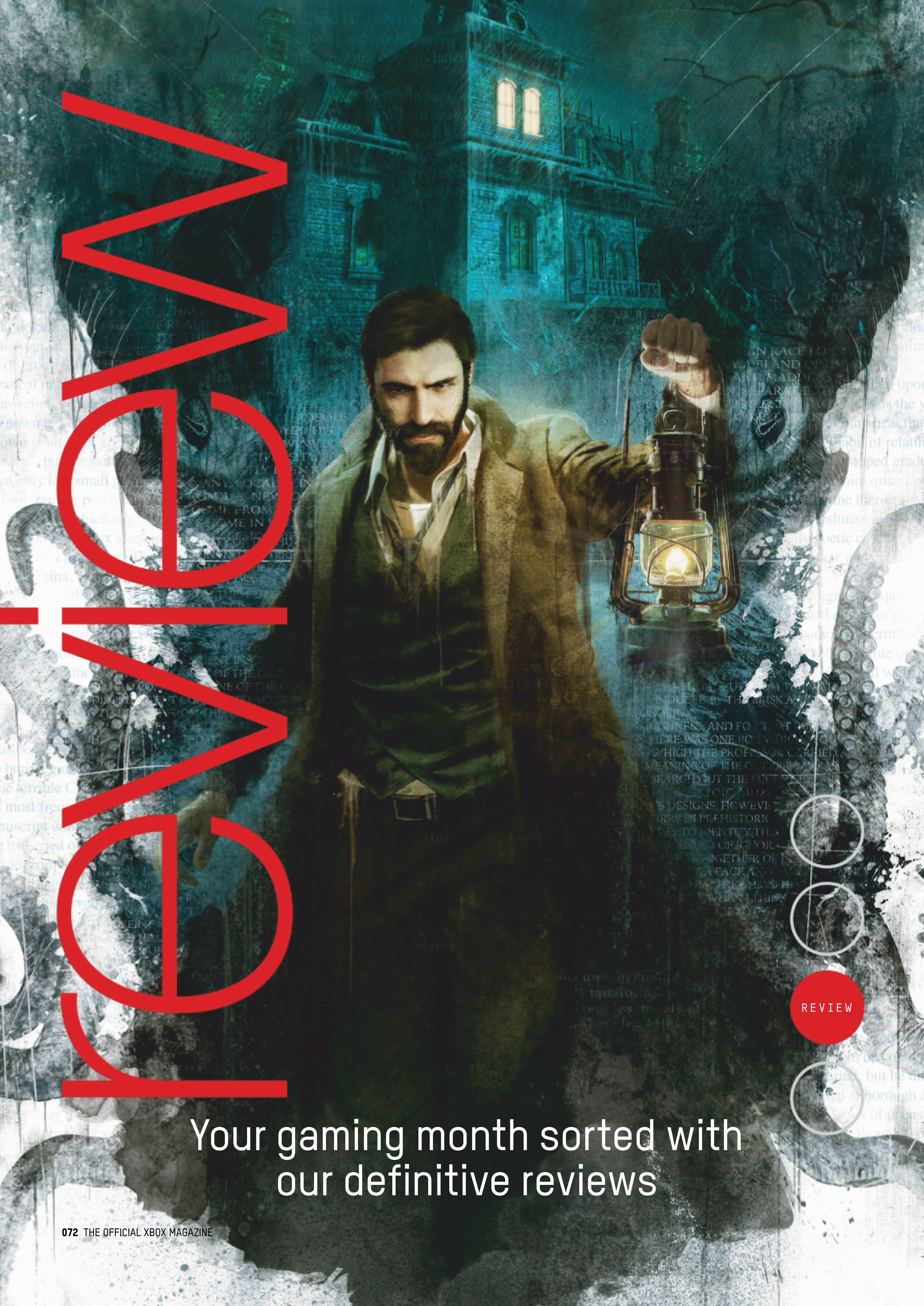
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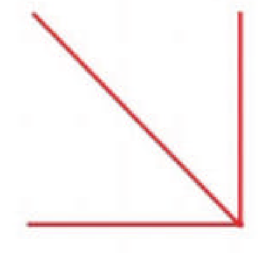
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review
REVIEW
Your gaming month sorted with our definitive reviews

Thanks to *Hitman 2* we've had to hide all the stationery from editor Chris, as every item has become a potential weapon



How we score:

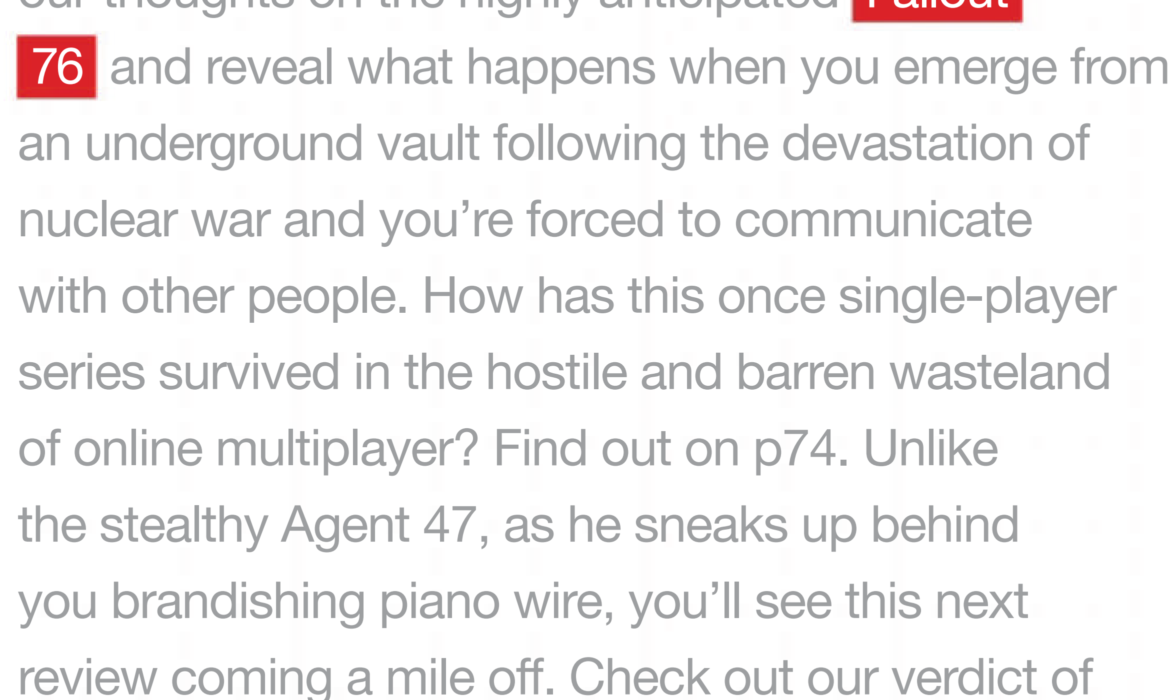
Can't make sense of our out-of-ten rating system? Then see below for your at-a-glance guide.

10 A gaming masterpiece
9 An essential slice of brilliance
8 Give it a whirl and you won't regret it
7 Some minor flaws but still good
6 Solid, but not setting any loins aflame
5 Average. Not good, but not terrible either
4 Honks just a bit
3 Look away, lest ye be tainted
2 Angry-makingly bad
1 Just... no...

ß Titles with this symbol are on Game Preview, so while they aren't finished, you can still find out if they're worth playing.



Irrespective of score, the Editor's Choice award is given to games with the quality, ambition or uniqueness to stand out from the crowd.



War. War never changes. As the saying goes. That may be true but developers are certainly adept at finding different ways to represent war, as can be seen in this month's review section. First off we share our thoughts on the highly anticipated **Fallout 76** and reveal what happens when you emerge from an underground vault following the devastation of nuclear war and you're forced to communicate with other people. How has this once single-player series survived in the hostile and barren wasteland of online multiplayer? Find out on p74. Unlike the stealthy Agent 47, as he sneaks up behind you brandishing piano wire, you'll see this next review coming a mile off. Check out our verdict of **Hitman 2** on p76. We put the sneaky fella through his paces and see if he shapes up against his previous episodic entry. Heading to the Second World War next is our review for **Battlefield V**. DICE has successfully combined everything it's learned from previous entries, but how does it (war) fare? Read on to p84 to find out. Last but not least we have the beautiful looking **11:11 – Memories Retold**. For its first major game, Aardman Animations commemorates the people of the First World War with a heartfelt tale from both sides of the conflict. Read what we thought about the game on p88.



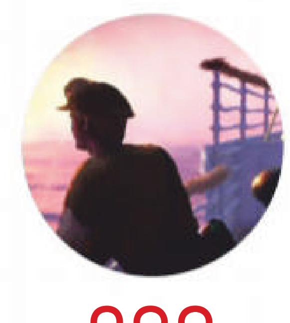
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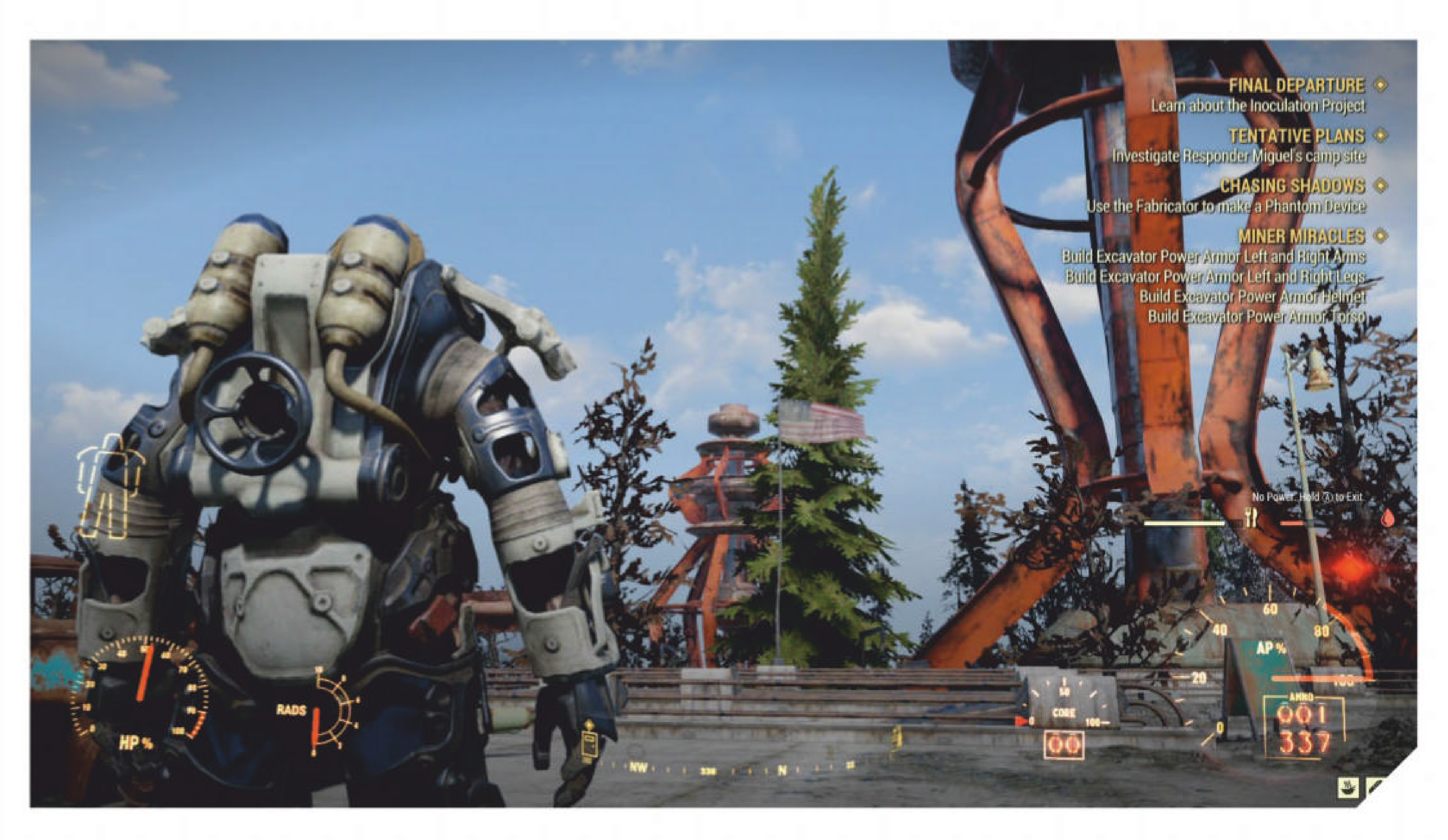


088

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West Virginia governor Jim Justice proclaimed 14 November 2018 to be Reclamation Day in the State, in recognition of the game's setting



PUBLISHER BETHESDA / **DEVELOPER** BETHESDA / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £59.99/$59.99

Fallout 76

FALLOUT'S FIRST ONLINE MULTIPLAYER FORAY IS BOLD BUT OFTEN BORING **CHRIS BURKE**

When we first heard about a persistently online multiplayer version of *Fallout*, we were excited. There were some concerns, but we had faith if only because the MMO version of the publishers' fantasy counterpart, *The Elder Scrolls*, is so good. Surely, we reasoned, Bethesda would invest its apocalypse with at the very least the things that work so well in Tamriel? We were wrong, and as huge *Fallout* fans, that makes us particularly sad.

The conceit of *Fallout 76* is that you and the 23 other players in your instance are the first humans out of the Vaults, 25 years after nuclear armageddon – so you won't find any other human NPCs to interact with. The idea being that this ramps up the drama and survival imperative, as well as making you play with other real humans to rebuild the world and make your own personal stories.

ABOVE Finding a Power Armor shell is a big deal, but you still have to craft the individual armour pieces to go on it.

At best, this is inconsistent, at worst, Bethesda is kind of cheating. So there are none of the familiar raider gangs that used to provide ready target practice, caps and gear in *Fallouts 3-4*. But there are something called The Scorched – ghouls that can use guns. So, the difference from Raiders is only that they don't talk as much. There are no human NPC vendors to trade with. But there are robots who have shops. So the difference from human NPC traders is… they don't talk as much. Ditto, quest givers – robots, not humans. Still NPCs, but now lacking back stories and personality.

And there *were* human survivors outside the Vaults, because there are quests gleaned from letters and holotapes that will lead you to corpses. There's evidence of raider gangs, and people surviving for years after the apocalypse. What happened to them? Why is there *nobody* left? All that this odd constraint the developers have put on themselves does, is to make Appalachia the most lonely, soulless place ever created for a videogame. Okay, so we get that the post-apocalypse wouldn't be much fun. But by taking away all of the series' rich character – from the human survivors in Megaton to the sentient ghouls of Goodneighbour – the *Fallout* universe is left hollow.

Alone together

If Bethesda believes that players would band together and create their own human stories, it is overestimating its audience. Or *underestimating* them. By creating instances of only 24 players with a map the size of Appalachia, they've created a world that's emptier than a politician's promises. Most players seem to want to just play the game like they would the previous single-player entries in the series, and be left alone to explore and discover the world at their own pace, untroubled

by randoms. And since the map is massive, you could play for hours and never see a soul.

While you can definitely play solo, it's also really difficult to play alone. Caps are hard to come by, ammo is super-scarce, and most enemies are hard to kill – ghouls and Scorched attack in numbers, which can make it tough. Other wandering creatures like Radscorpions, Charred Feral Ghouls or Glowing Ones are impossible to face alone, at a low level at least, without enough ammo or armour.

Fallout's VATS targeting system cannot, by the nature of this game being a persistently online real-time experience, work in the same slow-mo or time-freezing way as the previous games. So all that happens is you 'target' in real time, which is only any good for irritatingly small creatures. At point blank range, your bullets often don't even hit – and feral ghouls run straight at you the minute they see you. Without VATS, combat in *Fallout* games is simply not all that great.

Most of the time you'll be walking, and walking, and walking, and reading letters from dead people. Without a sense of any timely mission imperative, it can feel… boring.

Worst of all though is the constant, miserable drain on your character. You're forever dehydrated and you need to chug a bottle of water roughly every two minutes of game time. Even after going to the trouble of boiling the water, you still get radiation poisoning, but if you don't drink, you lose all your action points. You need to eat constantly too. You need to cook the food before it spoils, which it does very quickly, and it gives you diseases. It's all a part of the 'survival' element of the game, but we're finding it a drain not just on our character's AP and health, but of our enjoyment. So tedious does this 'reality' become that it's a wonder the game doesn't make you regularly defecate, or have to fill in tax forms, or watch the paint dry on your camp structures.



WHAT IS IT?
An MMORPG of the brilliant post-apocalyptic *Fallout* series, that arguably no one really, actually asked for.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
For now at least, it's like emptying your beautiful home of people, turning off the electric and talking to the fridge for a couple of hours.

WHO'S IT FOR?
We're not sure. Fans of *Fallout*'s single-player RPG brilliance will be disappointed; fans of multiplayer games like *Fortnite* will just be bored.



LEFT Your portable C.A.M.P. lets you set up a base with crafting workbenches.

Hope springs eternal

It's not all bad, though. Appalachia looks great, the map is impressively huge, and the world is rich with detail for you to find, and quests to follow that will lead you to uncover snippets of *Fallout* lore. There are stories told through letters, terminals and holotapes that, with a bit of patience and persistence (and quite a lot of reading), can turn into rewarding quests. At its brightest moments, finding and following threads of story that reveal interesting if failed human endeavours to survive the post-apocalypse, the game is still recognisably *Fallout*. The series has always been excellent at

The game features a map that is four times the size of that in *Fallout 4*. Which means a lot more walking, so get used to it



LEFT There are robots in the world still who will sell you stuff and give you quests.

FAR LEFT You can team up with, trade with or fight the other humans you meet.



world-building and environmental storytelling, and Appalachia is no exception. Even playing solo, it's engaging – but then every time we start to get into the game, we realise we're desperately wanting this game to be *Fallout 5*, or a meaty expansion to *Fallout 4* – but it's not.

The game still feels like a work in progress, though. And already, we get a sense that the aforementioned lack of characters may be being addressed. Since we started playing, we've met a wandering trader, a friendly supermutant called Grahm – a talking, *non-robot* NPC. Additionally some of the human corpses we're starting to find are... fresher. We would not be surprised to find some living human NPCs starting to crop up in Appalachia. Actually, *please* make it so, Bethesda.

As with *Sea Of Thieves*, the game is best played multiplayer with friends, even one friend. Working together to explore, trade, craft and take on some of the Events (necessary to level up and get caps and other rewards) and more hostile areas of the map, brings a whole other, less lonely, dimension to the game. It's not so good teaming up with strangers, though. While everyone's biggest fear before launch seems to have been griefing, it's working out quite the opposite. So effective is the game's punitive anti-griefing measures, that it would seem players are actively avoiding each other, just in case.

Today's S.P.E.C.I.A.L.s

S.P.E.C.I.A.L. stats return for *Fallout 76* – Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility and Luck. Previously these were assigned permanently, along with perks. This time, when you level up you're able to choose a card from a deck of Perk cards and assign it to an attribute. You can equip as many cards as you like to any attribute so long as you don't exceed its point value. You can also swap out your cards at any time, shuffling your deck to suit your play style or the mix of skills your team may require.

"The game is best played multiplayer with friends, even one friend"

Don't shoot!

To give it its due, the 'murder' idea is a great one. To stop players being dicks in PVP and ruining the game, if you keep shooting a player who doesn't retaliate, until you kill them, you become a wanted murderer, visible as such and available for other players to kill and claim the bounty. When we spotted a nearby murderer, it did provide a little excitement. Shooting the miscreant dead gave us a reward, an achievement and a little bit of momentary schadenfreude. But for the most part, it seems that players are so afraid of PvP interactions that everyone is avoiding other players like they're diseased. Which they may be.

Fallout 76 uses the same Creation engine as *Fallout 4* – it plays the same, it looks the same (maybe a *little* more polished), as that three-year-old game. But for what *Fallout 76* lacks by comparison, if you haven't yet played, or completed, *Fallout 4* and all of its wonderful DLC, we'd recommend that over *76*. For now, at least.

The score we give below should almost be our usual 'B' reserved for games that are still in Beta – *Fallout 76*, to be as kind as we can to it, is ongoing. The game and its world deserves more, and so do we. Those solid ideas that have already been put in the game are a decent foundation – there just needs to be *more* to the wasteland. We're holding out a lot of hope for things like community-made mods, as we saw in *Fallout 4*, and fixes, patches and improvements over time. In a year's time, this may even be the best *Fallout* game ever.

In the meantime though, we're going back to *Fallout 4*, because frankly it's just more *human*. ■



OXM VERDICT

A bold experiment that hasn't quite paid off. Keep an eye on it though, it's still got time.



There's an in-game nod to *Freedom Fighters*, the rights to which are back under IO's control



PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £50/$59.99

Hitman 2

BACK WITH A (SILENCED) BANG **MARTIN KITTS**



Although he spent the early part of his career whacking mobsters for cash, these days Agent 47 is firmly aligned with the good guys. He still spends most of his time arranging grisly and amusing deaths, but in this eagerly awaited follow-up to the wonderful episodic *Hitman*, our man breaks away from his former paymasters in pursuit of a global conspiracy led by one of his own anonymous clients.

After a beach-house taster that serves as an extended tutorial, what follows is a globe-trotting tour de force of five intricately crafted levels, ranging in scale from substantial to absolutely humungous, any of which could easily be considered a career highlight for this long-running series.

There's a sunny suburban tribute to one of *Hitman: Blood Money*'s most popular missions, and a sprawling jungle level with a drug baron's compound hidden beyond a subjugated village. A motor race level offers the chance to assassinate one of the drivers at various points from grid to after-party while dressed as a giant bird, and there are challenges throughout based around sniping targets from half a mile away.

Disguises are the crowbars with which you pry at a level's defences, probing and pushing until something gives and new possibilities are revealed. Maybe you'll be one step closer to the target, or maybe just somewhere you can find a piece of intel that will help further down the line. But a select few NPCs know their colleagues' faces well enough to see through certain disguises, and sneaking past these ones adds an extra layer of difficulty.

It's a hit, man

Until you've got that initial foothold, *Hitman* games have often tended to be a bit daunting. Do the wrong thing and somebody will call for help, which inevitably escalates into chaos, and if frequent failures put you off taking any risks it can be hard to see exactly where you're meant to pick up the thread of a mission. *Hitman* Season One alleviated that problem by providing Opportunities – predefined sequences that would guide you step by step through a hit and show off some of the level's coolest features.

Hitman 2 comes pretty close to perfecting the format, rebranding them as Mission Stories and tying them more closely to the game's plot – they're essential for revealing characters' motives. They're all available from the start of a level, so you can just pick one and follow it without having to first uncover it via exploration, and some even last for the entirety of a multi-target mission. They don't necessarily lead you by the hand, and there's still plenty to figure out along the way – for example, one step in a lengthy Mission Story simply

short cut

WHAT IS IT?
Stealth, intrigue and murder with a master of disguise.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
The pinnacle of a format that's taken 18 years to refine.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Newcomers will find this the best introduction to the world of *Hitman*.

"It's a richly rewarding game, filled to bursting with things to do"

FAR LEFT Target half a mile away? No problem.





ABOVE Tailing a suspect, completely incognito. Have you spotted him yet? Oh.

LEFT No game does crowds quite like *Hitman*. Some of the locations are teeming.



asks you to steal a necklace that's the well-guarded centrepiece of a museum exhibit, with no further hints about how you might accomplish this.

After completing a level, rather than moving straight into the next one the game directs you towards unfinished Mission Stories that will reveal more about its characters and situations. Replaying with a fresh new approach is the only way to see the full extent of these levels. While the main story can be blasted through in perhaps 10–15 hours, you could easily spend far longer than that dissecting a single level and still not have seen everything it has to offer.

Few games are as densely packed as *Hitman 2*. The Mumbai level, a particular standout, has a bewildering maze of crowded streets but also dizzying verticality. An unfinished skyscraper with a movie set halfway up; apartments ripe with sniping opportunities; catwalks and bridges; sewers and catacombs below. All of it fully populated with NPCs and carefully thought-out lines of sight, every doorway with the potential to be explored and exploited.

As in every level, once you move off the beaten track it becomes a playground where you can just have fun being as stealthy or as noisy as you please, with as much assistance as you like or with none whatsoever. If you discover something great it can effectively be recorded in Contracts mode and set as a challenge for other players to replicate.

GHOST TRICK

In Ghost mode two players compete to be first to silently assassinate a target. The other player is always visible, so you can see what he's up to and how close he's getting, but he actually exists in his own instance of the game. Anything he does to his own NPCs won't affect those in your game. When one player makes a kill without being spotted, the other gets 20 seconds to repeat the feat, otherwise a point is awarded. First to five wins; it's best played with an actual friend to minimise rage-quitting.

Hide and shriek

There are a few mechanical updates over Season One, such as the ability to be concealed in crowds and bushes, and functional mirrors on the walls that sometimes allow NPCs to spot you from another room. There's also the welcome re-emergence of a briefcase for smuggling weapons, and veterans of last season can import all of the previous game's levels and start over with the benefit of these new bits and pieces (it's also available as a DLC pack for newcomers).

On top of all this, there are one-off Elusive Target missions, expert Escalation hits that build over several increasingly difficult rounds, a dedicated sniper challenge level for one or two players, and a decent two-player competitive mode. It's a richly rewarding game, filled to bursting with things to do, constantly presenting new ways to play, and absolutely, positively the best *Hitman* ever. ■



OXM VERDICT

A fan-pleasing sequel that's a great game in its own right. Take aim at it.





PUBLISHER WIRED PRODUCTIONS / **DEVELOPER** CAGED ELEMENT / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £34.99

GRIP: Combat Racing

FUTURISTIC RACER SERVES UP FUGLY BUT FUN METALLIC MAYHEM **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

Gravity is such a pain. Sure, the physics force may have made that Newton chap famous, but in day-to-day life it often sucks. Pushing a pram uphill. Dropping an expensive vase. Forgetting to stick your handbrake on, then slowly careening into the car behind you on a gentle incline. Screw you, gravity. Thankfully, the G word is not something you have to worry about in this extreme sci-fi racer.

GRIP is certainly an apt name. The futuristic speed buggies on display are as happy racing on ceilings and curving walls as they are merrily bundling over flat terrain. With each racer seemingly stuck to every surface by some sort of space glue, Caged Element throws twisting, vertically stacked courses in your direction at every turn. Whether pulling off loop-the-loops above the seedy streets of Orbital Prime's District 404, or causing mini sandstorms with your monster truck-style wheels on the aggressive desert slopes of Jahtra, gravity is a dirty word in *GRIP*'s universe.

Wrecking crew

Flipping the finger at traditional physics isn't this speedster's only trick: violent power-ups also play their part in races. In fact, entire modes are dedicated to blasting the bumpers off other racers, both online and off. Wreck your foes' rides in crunching arena deathmatches with piercing Painkiller rockets. Shunt them silly with the Ramraider power-up. Use the Disruptor to slow time for every other vehicle but yours, then exploit that rupture in the space-time continuum to leave 'em for dead. With so many po-faced racers on the market, it's refreshing to see a game embrace the chaotic carnage of the original Xbox's cult hit *Flatout*.

It's just a shame *GRIP*'s structure is far more conventional than its wicked on-course action. While the campaign is generously stuffed – it's composed of 11 increasingly difficult tiers – progression is rote, with no cutscenes or other fanfare to bookmark your progress or celebrate your speed of sound achievements. Yes, the amount of content is admirable, we just wish it had been put together with a little more flair.

Though blitzing through tiers can feel a touch grindy, at least *GRIP* has a healthy selection of modes. Standard contests are given added flavour in the likes of Ultimate Race, where your overall speed and attacks on rivals reward you with points no matter where you are on the grid. Combat-free Speed Demon events are refreshingly pure by contrast, where hitting every glowing green boost pad becomes critical. Elimination and a lightning-fast take on a bomb mode round off *GRIP*'s generous suite of contrasting contests.

Weirdly, Caged Element's racer even has a little *Mirror's Edge* revving away under its banged up bonnet. The game's cutely named Carkour mode consists of almost 20 devilishly constructed obstacle courses; the kind of sinisterly snaking tracks Sid

short cut

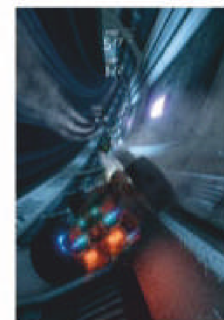
WHAT IS IT?
A blisteringly quick mesh of racing and violent car combat.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
A modern day *Rollcage*, with added hatred for gravity.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Retro racing fans who miss smashing rivals to pieces.

The game was inspired by Psygnosis' old *Rollcage* games. Nope, we don't remember them either





LEFT Keeping a clean racing line while trying to blast your foes can be challenging.

"The handling and impact of weapons is weirdly weightless"

FAR LEFT Even the 'easiest' Carkour courses are punishing. Get ready for all the trial-and-error.

RIGHT Exploding rivals is fun and immensely satisfying.



from *Toy Story* might make if you gave the evil tyke his own twisted Scalextric kit. Is it a cool idea? Absolutely. Does *GRIP*'s twist on footless free-running actually work in practice? Not entirely. A forever jittery camera constantly disorientates every time you try to jump off a ramp onto another, even steeper surface. If you're going to stick with Carkour, best have a sick bag lying next to your Xbox One.

Regular courses aren't an unqualified success story either. *GRIP*'s basic, blocky art style reflects the game's semi-budget price-point, but there's little artistry in its generic sci-fi cities and samey deserts. At times, it's hard to believe this energetic racer is running on the same console as *Forza Horizon 4*. Yet while it's certainly no looker, at least *GRIP*'s environments are pleasingly interactive. Stone columns and pillars can be targeted with a well-placed rocket launcher, and the resulting blast (with proper timing) can send a heap of rocks crashing down on an opponent. Pull off such a piece of course-corrupting trickery, and the smashed-up results are seriously satisfying.

Handle with care

Sadly, the general handling of these customisable roadsters – you can tweak them with different liveries, paint jobs, and wheel types – is less gratifying. For a game that involves blowing futuristic cars to bits, the overall handling and impact of weapons is weirdly weightless. There's a general floatiness to proceedings, and destroying rivals with rockets or mines never feels quite as punchy as you'd like. Unrefined cornering also jars at first, though this isn't much of an issue once you master the handbrake turn.

There's no denying *GRIP* is a slightly uneven package. At its best, its gleeful brand of crunching chaos and carnage can be thrilling, yet in its duller moments, that flatly constructed campaign can really wear you down. This is an old-school throwback to a simpler time of crumpled metal and apologetic vehicular smackdowns. If you've been finding *Forza* entirely too polite, this helter-skelter hellraiser could be right up your stupendously speedy street. ■

SPEEDSTER STORIES

For a kinda crude sci-fi speed demon, *GRIP* has a surprisingly convoluted backstory. In the game's alternate, ultra violent future, the street racing of the early 21st century eventually evolved into vicious vehicle contests only pirate TV would cover. With drivers all taking a share of the cut, soon the emphasis turned to obliterating your competitors to deny riders said funds. The whole sport eventually turned so murderously aggressive, racers soon had to move off-world to host events owing to the pesky interference of Earth's military forces.



OXM VERDICT

An unpolished yet endearing racer that charms with a dose of old-school spirit.

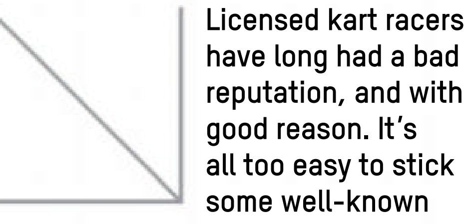


Rugrats got an 'all grown up' spinoff, with 55 episodes. But here they're just babies

PUBLISHER MAXIMUM GAMES / GAMEMILL ENTERTAINMENT / **DEVELOPER** BAMTANG GAMES / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £29.99/$39.99

Nickelodeon Kart Racers

WHO MUTED THE CHANNEL? **JUSTIN TOWELL**

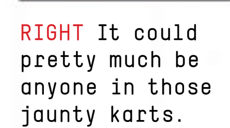


Licensed kart racers have long had a bad reputation, and with good reason. It's all too easy to stick some well-known characters in go-karts, make some tracks based loosely on their worlds and add themed weapons, basically copying the template that Nintendo forged back in 1992 with *Mario Kart*. Originality takes a back door while the money comes rolling in. But even at their most cynical, licensed kart racers at least need to look and sound like their source material. *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* doesn't.

It looks passable, though basic, but it doesn't even include character voices. Nobody says "Hey Tommy, I gotta idea," or "Can I be excused for the rest of my life?" Instead, characters communicate their dismay or jubilation via a text box in the corner of the screen. Whatever the reason – licensing? – it's just not good enough. And with no announcer to keep the excitement up either, the branding becomes nebulous and the enjoyment level plummets.

There's a disappointingly small roster of racers, too, considering the wealth of cartoons that the company owns. You get Tommy, Angelica and Reptar from *Rugrats* (but no Chuckie), Spongebob Squarepants with his friends Patrick and Sandy Cheeks (snigger), as well as Arnold and Helga from *Hey Arnold!* and all four Ninja Turtles, who seem slightly out of place. Not as much as their weapons, mind, which look sharp and lethal, fully rendered in this 3+ rated game.





RIGHT It could pretty much be anyone in those jaunty karts.



short cut

WHAT IS IT?
A 1-4 player kart racer based on four Nickelodeon cartoons of varying appeal.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Every generic kart racer ever. Seriously, any characters could sit in these cars.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Children who love slime and Spongebob. Which is all children, apparently.

"The game is full of green slime. What is it with kids and slime?"

As you'd expect, you can pick up items from boxes that litter the course and – when you learn which object does what – there's a functional and pleasantly frustration-free karting experience to be had.

The karts control well, thanks to a drift button that gives you a speed boost depending on how long you can hold your slide (familiar?), but there's little feeling of weight. Everything looks and feels very basic, from the garish environments to the way the jet ski sections just use a constant left and right autowaggle on the steering to convey being on liquid. All it does is encourage motion sickness, and makes cornering feel strange.

Going green

Speaking of liquid, the game is full of green slime. Seriously, what is it with kids and slime? Slime fans are over-catered for here. Drive through a green puddle to fill your turbo bar, splash through a slime waterfall to find a shortcut, ride a slime-powered jet-ski across slime (perpetually filling your slime turbo meter), and even get a bucket of the stuff dumped on your head while you celebrate on the podium. It's an odd fixation, and unsurprisingly very boring if you don't like slime.

There are Grands Prix to enter, some of which are arbitrarily locked away when you begin. They're just longer series of the same tracks and offer nothing new except increased monotony. Seven races into a series, you'll wonder if it's possible to fail a race quickly and rely on already-won points to prevail, just so you don't have to endure another three laps.

It's a pretty damning list of negatives. Poor use of a decent licence, basic graphics and sound, no original ideas to speak of, samey circuits, a drawn-out upgrade system and no online mode all add up to make this feel like a cheap, fan-exploiting exercise. It's not a complete disaster, but don't put up with crushing mediocrity just for the sake of a license you like. Spend your money on something better. ■



OXM VERDICT
Repetitive, unoriginal and not even voiced. Tommy and Spongebob deserve more.



A sequel to 2014's similarly confusing *Euro Fishing*, this follow-up adds US lakes

PUBLISHER DOVETAIL GAMES/ **DEVELOPER** DOVETAIL GAMES / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £29.99/$39.88

Fishing Sim World

FUGLY FISHER HAS NO PLAICE IN YOUR COLLECTION **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

Though we've never tried our hand at cardiovascular surgery, we're pretty sure it's easier to master than real-life fishing. One member of Team OXM spent his birthday this past June trying to catch brown trout in the teeming rain of the Scottish Highlands, and the resulting six, soaked (trout-free) hours scarred his soul forever. Annoyingly, landing a fishy in this thoroughly unwelcoming bass-snagging sim is almost as tricky.

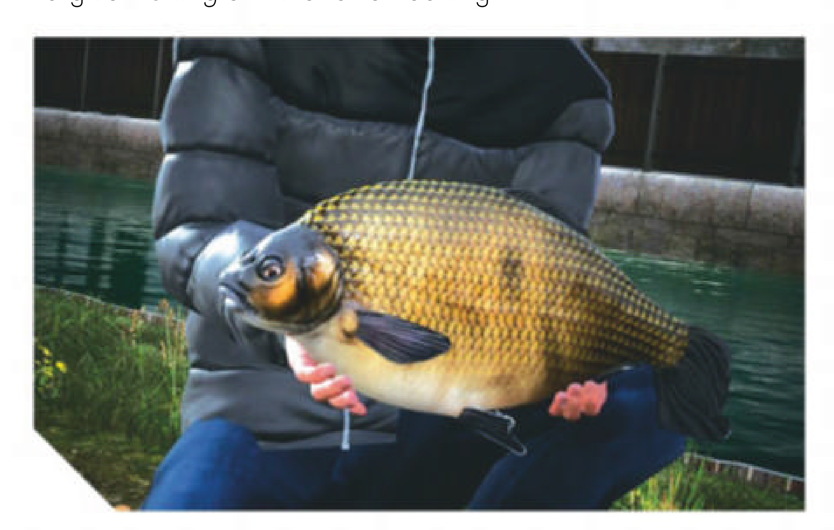
Dovetail Games specialises in hardcore sims – see this year's *Train Sim World* – so it's no shocker its take on virtual angling is unapologetically challenging. Yet where the studio's choo-choo adventure had a perversely endearing quality in spite of its po-faced subject matter, *Fishing Sim World* is just flat-out boring.

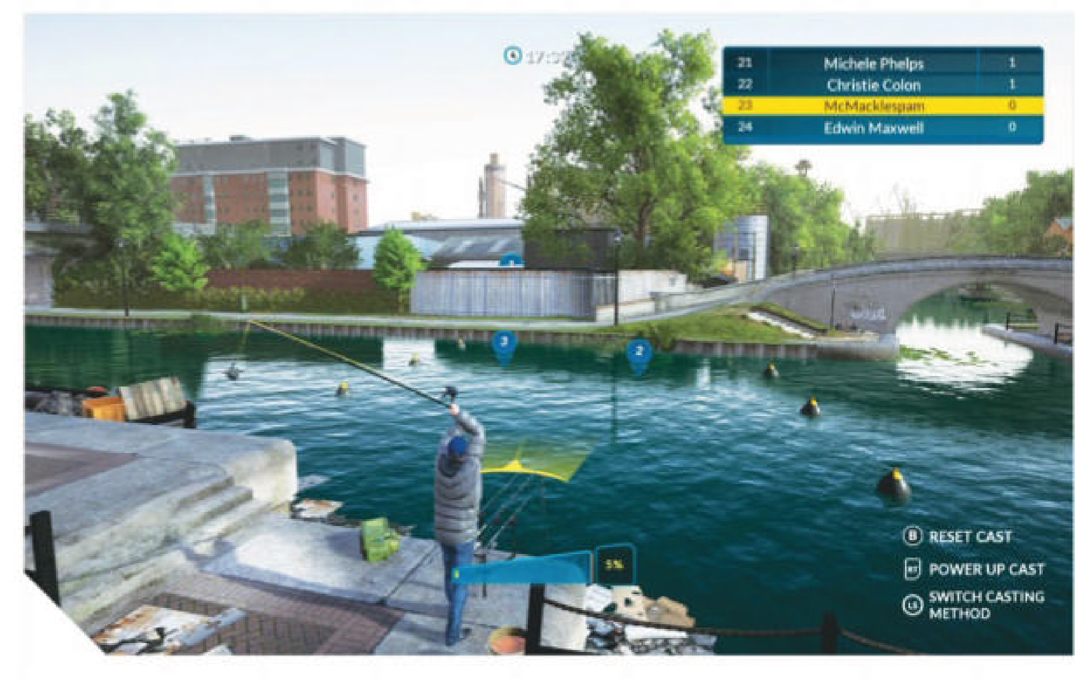
It's also terribly uninviting. For a game with so many complex mechanics, Dovetail does a terrible job of easing you into this fisher's confusing waters. Key tutorials are buried away in submenus where the narrator does his best to befuddle your brain every step of the way. There's a quite ludicrous amount of depth to this carp-catcher – not only do you have a wealth of lines and tackles to choose from, you can even fish with three rods at once – so the fact it callously throws you into the drowny end of the pool is unforgivable.

Bass effect

As a budget title, we can almost forgive *Fishing Sim World* for looking like a cheap and cheerful Xbox 360 title. What we *can't* get past is how perplexing its systems are. Just take the game's boats. While fishing on larger bodies of water – like Lake Johnson in the US – you sail around using a sonar to try and detect fish. Trouble is, said radar is about as reliable as a Rolex made from silly putty, which makes finding bass, bluegills and pickerels as easy as digging out a needle in a haystack the size of Europe. We don't see a fish until we've been playing for 70 minutes.

On rare occasions, the game's fastidious attention to detail pays off. The fact you can play with either a golf-esque swing meter to cast your rod, or a more accurate but challenging analogue system with the right stick, is certainly welcome. There's also a commendable variety of fish. Not only are there dozens of species in *Fishing Sim World*, but each one is procedurally generated, meaning you'll never catch exactly the same size fish. Although that said, we have caught a *lot* of identical looking carp in Grand Union Canal.





LEFT Unless you were born with a rod in your hands, don't choose the Total Cast Control scheme.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?
A hardcore angler that will put you to sleep.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Far Cry 5's fishing minigame... minus the fun.

WHO'S IT FOR?
The one Xbox owner who buys *Angling Times*.

> "We can't get past how perplexing its systems are"

While it's obviously aimed at an incredibly niche market, the most damning reel we can cast in the game's direction is the fact its take on fishing is less fun than either *Far Cry 5* or *Red Dead Redemption 2*. On the rare occasions you do hook a potential catch, the resulting struggle feels strangely weightless, and certainly less tactile than the two open-world games we just mentioned. That both those sandboxes manage to out-angle a specialist fishing sim with throwaway minigames tells the whole salmon story.

If you're really desperate for horrendously hardcore fishing action, Dovetail has at least put together a fairly generous package. A wealth of single-player tournaments and online contests could keep the most committed digital fishers occupied for weeks. For everyone else, the fugly, terribly explained action will drive you back to catching Wild West catfish with Arthur Morgan. ■



OXM VERDICT
Ugly, dull and uninviting, this miserable sim deserves to sleep with the fishes.



Battlefield V is the fifteenth major *Battlefield* game

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS / **DEVELOPER** EA DICE / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £49.99/$59.99

Battlefield V

EPIC, TOP-QUALITY WWII SHOOTER ACTION – WITH BITS MISSING AT LAUNCH **STEVE BOXER**



EA's *Battlefield* franchise has never quite managed to achieve the same mass appeal as Activision's rival *Call Of Duty*, so despite being Electronic Arts' flagship first-person shooter, it still manages to maintain an air of being a game for those in the know. And in particular, a game for those who prefer their multiplayer shooting to take the form of large-scale, plausible warfare, rather than claustrophobic, close-in shoot-outs.

Last year's much-lauded, World War I-set *Battlefield 1* marked a change-up for the franchise, and the good news is that *Battlefield V* builds impressively on its good work. The World War II setting seems perfect for *Battlefield*: its weapons and vehicles are more sophisticated and controllable than *Battlefield 1*'s equivalents, without going over the top. It's a technological marvel which looks astonishing, and developer DICE has really gone to town with its trademark destructibility.

When you're deep into one of its skirmishes, with Spitfires and Messerschmitts spitting fire overhead, tanks rumbling around and the giant, impeccably designed maps bombed to rubble, it provides the sort of thrill, often spilling over into terror, that you could imagine those participating in the real war might have felt.

Missing in action

But there's a catch. In its eagerness to show everyone what it would put into *Battlefield V*, DICE ended up overpromising, and the result is that big chunks of the game are missing at launch. Most notably, the Tides of War mode, a hugely ambitious live-service attempt to create constantly shifting large-scale campaigns. Firestorm, the game's take on the battle royale format, won't surface till March 2019.

Following *Battlefield 1*'s lead, War Stories take the form of self-contained vignettes covering diverse (and off the beaten track) engagements from World War II. Under No Flag sees you play an East End gangster recruited to the nascent Special Boat Service. Nordlys, meanwhile, sees you playing a teenage, female resistance fighter in Norway, and manages to achieve a Scandi-noir vibe. And Tirailleur sees a troop of French North African soldiers push to liberate France.

The War Stories have a pleasingly open-world structure that lets you adopt any number of play-styles, and they give you a taste of various multiplayer modes. They are eminently replayable, which is just as well since none last longer than two hours, and there are only three at launch.

The standout multiplayer mode is Grand Operations. It mixes and matches various modes, such as Frontlines, in which the two sides vie to push each other back to different areas of the map. Grand Operations take place in one general vicinity,

short cut

WHAT IS IT?
A state-of-the-art, 64-player World War II shooter with a single-player campaign.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
High-tech, visually sumptuous and nicely fettled – but unfinished.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Those who like their first-person shooting to involve large-scale battles and diverse roles.

"There's one drawback: it's only something like 70 to 80 per cent complete"

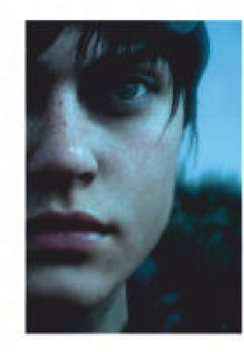
FAR LEFT It can feel downright scary when you're involved in one of these missions.





ABOVE A fourth war story will see you play as a German tank commander.

LEFT The action, for the most part, leaves you gagging for more.



but play out over three days, which gives you a real feeling of being part of an operation that is developing according to how well you fight. And if, after three days, stalemate prevails, a fourth-day Final Stand is added, which is basically a no-respawns battle royale, complete with a shrinking map.

World at war

Battlefield V launched with six maps, all of which are simply impeccable. They are huge. Some of the modes, like Team Deathmatch, don't use their full extent, but in modes like Conquest and Domination, you might have to try to gain control of as many as seven flags – pretty much requiring the use of vehicles to get around. *Battlefield V*'s multiplayer modes should cater to pretty much all tastes, and are already sufficiently plentiful to keep you interested for the duration. They felt a tiny bit chaotic before launch, but DICE managed to organise them in a more logical manner in time for release.

WHAT'S STILL TO COME

December 4 should have seen *Battlefield V*'s first major update, bringing the fourth War Story – The Last Tiger – and a new tank-focused map called Panzerstorm, plus the Practice Range. The live Tides of War service should have arrived on the same date.

A January 2019 update will bring the Rush and Squad Conquest modes, as well as the co-operative Combined Arms mode. And a third update scheduled for March 2019 will bring the Firestorm battle royale mode, plus a new Greece map.

The classes are spot-on, too, with *Battlefield*'s customary emphasis on support, opening the game up for those whose fast-twitch skills aren't exactly the envy of others. The Support class, for example, lets you resupply team-mates with ammo and build fortifications – a crucial role when a map has been bombed to smithereens. Medics have a quick-heal, which comes in handy at hotly contested pinch-points and in Team Deathmatches, in particular.

Progression-wise, *Battlefield V* is logical enough, rewarding you in particular for jumping between classes and making the most of vehicles. You earn in-game currency at a pretty glacial rate, though, and all you can really spend it on is shaders for your weaponry. As with its predecessors, *Battlefield*'s matching feels pretty decent – helped by the fact that you're generally in a huge battlefield with 63 other players.

Battlefield V is a very fine game indeed: you won't find a more harrowingly realistic and convincing emulation of what fighting in World War II would have been like. We probably would have pegged it as this year's best first-person shooter but for one glaring drawback: it's only something like 70 to 80 per cent complete. It won't have all its elements in place until March 2019 at the earliest – by which time, it'll probably be cheaper to buy than it is now. So perhaps we'll end up lauding it as 2019's best first-person shooter. ■



OXM VERDICT

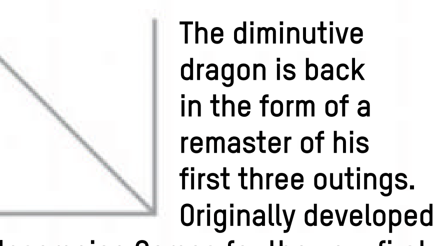
An excellent shooter a little compromised by chunks missing at launch.



PUBLISHER ACTIVISION / **DEVELOPER** TOYS FOR BOB / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £29.99/$39.99

Spyro Reignited Trilogy

CAN SPYRO SET THE WORLD ALIGHT ONCE MORE FOR XBOX? **WARREN BROWN**



The diminutive dragon is back in the form of a remaster of his first three outings. Originally developed by Insomniac Games for the very first PlayStation console 20 years ago, Toys For Bob has resurrected the trilogy Xbox owners missed out on.

Coming amid a wave of modern remakes and HD re-releases, this *Spyro* collection feels a little out of place when compared to the more universally appealing *Crash* trilogy by Naughty Dog. No doubt it's an attempt to cash in on gamer nostalgia while also appealing to the younger *Skylander* audience – a shrewd move to be sure and one that might just pay off for the developers.

All scaled up

Unreal Engine 4, along with the power of modern consoles, has been used to great effect. The remaster is exactly that: this collection serves up the original games, complete with their associated inhabitants and environments, in great fidelity. Graphically everything looks stunning, especially when compared side-by-side to the originals, and certainly hold their own alongside modern adventure games. The worlds feel solid and well realised, but coming off the back of *Skylanders: Imaginators* some gamers may notice a lack of finesse.

Younger players more used to the toys-to-life games, itself spun-off from this original trilogy, may feel restricted as gameplay isn't as diverse. Yes there's many a mini-game to spice up the repetitive nature of a collectathon, but the formula is much the same in each world – maybe that's to be expected as being a remaster there's no real surprises here. But should there be?

Where the games do see a significant upgrade is the controls, especially that of the camera, which is now mapped intuitively to the right analogue stick. The results lead to a more fluid in-game traversal; speeding up exploration significantly.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?
A remaster of the original trilogy, originally on PS1.

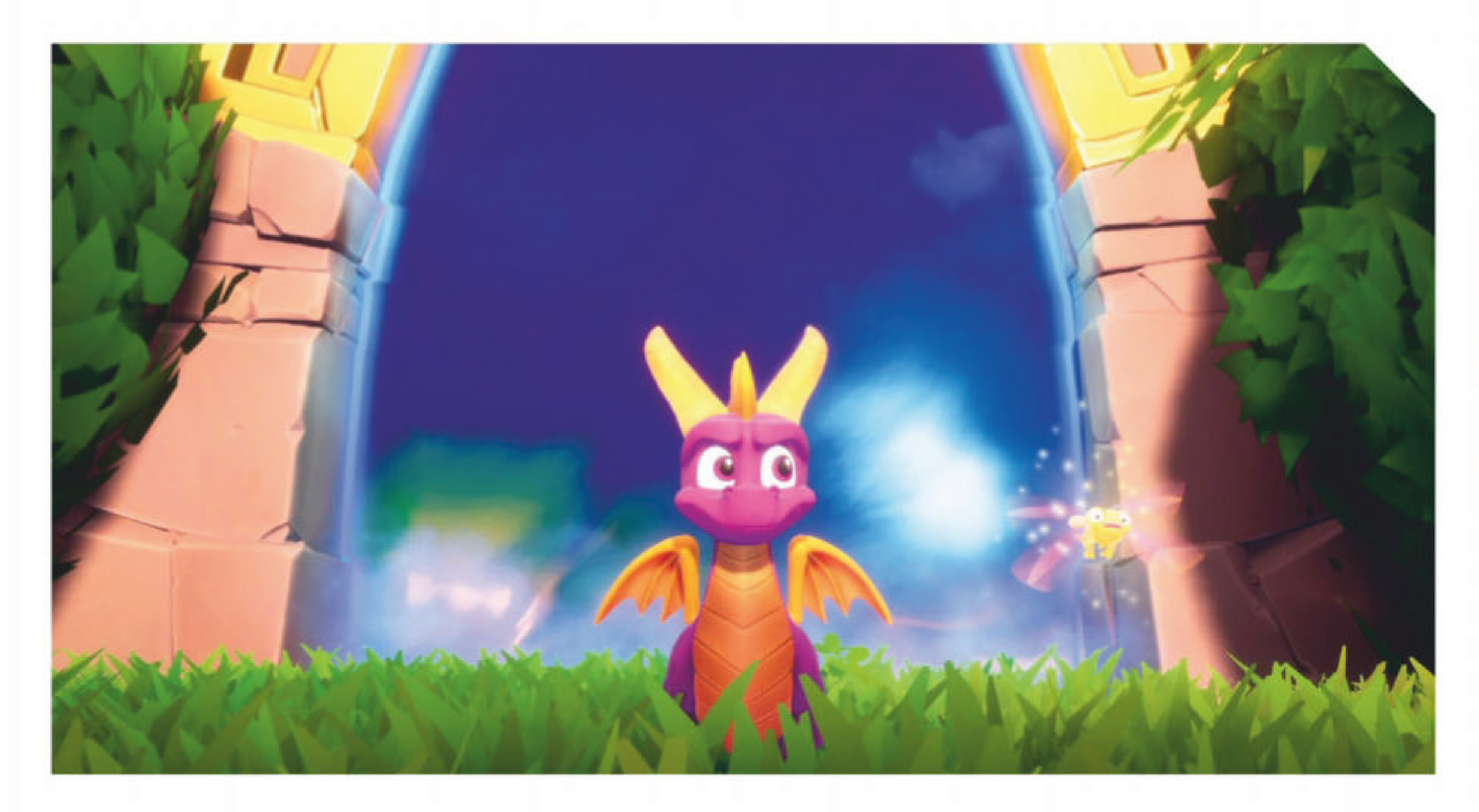
WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Fast-paced fun that doesn't let up.

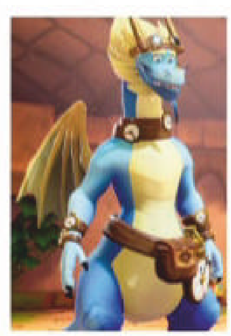
WHO'S IT FOR?
Everyone, but it will best resonate with younger audiences.

Switching between the original 32-bit era graphics and this enhanced iteration would have been the icing on the cake but alas it's not an option. The developers have instead included the ability to flip between the original musical score and the remastered compositions, and Tom Kenny reprises his role as the young dragon. Acoustic changes aside, the plot remains intact and players are required to sit through short introductions to each game's cartoonish antagonists such as Gnasty Gnorc, Ripto and an evil sorceress rabbit named, er… Bianca.

Spyro's repertoire includes dashing, jumping, rolling and blasting short bursts of fire, but additional moves do become available in the second and third outings. Retrofitting some of the latter title's abilities would have made for less restrictive gameplay and wouldn't have felt out of place. After all it's the faithfully recreated worlds that offer a draw to returning players, as many offer up tantalising glimpses of out-of-reach platforms, the landscape itself becoming the

Returning to a cleared area re-spawns the bad guys. Re-defeating them is the key to building up a reserve of extra lives





ABOVE The dragon elders in the first game now have unique and varying characteristics; an improvement over the original.

“There’s a love of the original trilogy evident in this thoughtful remake”

FAR LEFT Look at him! He’s cute even when angry!

RIGHT Some worlds can feel a bit empty thanks in part to the games faithful recreation of the levels and inhabiting NPCs.



puzzle to solve. This coupled with the ‘always-winning’ reward mechanic which grants a constant flow of rapid pick-ups and easy-to-defeat enemy types, means the younger generation will be engaged for many hours.

Sparx a’ flyin

Spyro controls extremely well and rumble has been used to great effect. Players will feel every thud of those dragon paws, and his fire attack now feels suitably hazardous, singeing grass, foliage and wildlife alike. Players can happily toast the local native fauna, causing the likes of innocent bunnies and birds to be resurrected as butterflies, only for your dragonfly sidekick Sparx to eat them. His representative colour acts an intuitive health counter. When Sparx is yellow Spyro is at full strength, get a knock from an enemy and he’ll go blue, then green. Spyro can take three hits safely until Sparx disappears. One subsequent hit will see Spyro lose a life.

GUIDEBOOK GLUTTON

Players can access Spyro’s Guidebook via the menu and it’s the best way to keep track of progress as the game’s HUD is surprisingly sparse. Everything Spyro collects, rescues and retrieves is recorded in it. Completionists will revel within its pages.

Worlds such as Sunny Flight and Crystal Flight act to offer up a bit of diversity as mini-games wrapped in the premise of teaching Spyro to fly. The objective is to stay airborne by completing certain activities such as destroying enemies and collecting items while maintaining a time-based flight mode. Controls aren’t as intuitive as Spyro’s ground-based frolics but the levels do add a welcome change of pace.

It takes careful attention to your surroundings to locate all the hidden areas, let alone access them, and achieving 100% for every world is quite demanding. Gaining height is the main challenge and requires the player to glide to key points in a landscape in order to progress to higher ground.

There’s a love of the original trilogy evident in this thoughtful remake, and the addition of skill points that unlock bonus art galleries demonstrates a rewarding level of fan service. Perhaps more importantly this collection offers a chance for the whole family to (re) experience the fun together. At a time of year when many will be enjoying their new Black Friday 4k tellies. ■



OXM VERDICT

A single-player adventure that comes pretty close to that magic ‘plumber’ formula.



The first recorded incidence of the conflict being referred to as "the First World War" was actually as early as September 1914

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO / **DEVELOPER** AARDMAN ANIMATIONS/DIGIXART / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £24.99/$32.99

11-11: Memories Retold

CELEBRATING THE ARMISTICE CENTENARY IN GAME FORM **STEVE BOXER**



***11-11: Memories Retold* is a classic example of a game that simply can't be judged using the usual criteria. It has an agenda which couldn't be further from the average game's desire to make money via providing entertainment (although it still does the latter and will hopefully find an audience, providing the former). Instead, it aims to commemorate and educate, providing a snapshot of the realities of World War I, having arrived ahead of the centenary of that terrible war's Armistice Day.**

Aardman Animations sees itself as a storytelling company – as any fans of Wallace & Gromit, Shaun the Sheep et al will testify – and *Memories Retold* is its first substantial attempt to use a videogame as its narrative medium. It's important to emphasise that *Memories Retold* is a story-based game – it's about as far away from a first-person shooter as you can get (indeed, neither of the characters you play in it wields a gun). Gameplay-wise, it occupies point-and-click adventure territory, along similar lines to Telltale Games' output or the likes of *Life Is Strange*.

But the first striking aspect of *Memories Retold* which leaps out at you is its visual style. It is impressionistic in a literal sense: Aardman Animations developed a style which it describes as a "living painting", so its graphics appear to be composed of brush-strokes which bubble and flow, as if they were being painted by Monet or Turner in front of your eyes. The element of blurriness that imparts shields you from explicit depictions of blood and gore but somehow it adds to the game's impact, forcing you to contemplate more deeply the horror which is depicted. There's a tactile aspect to the game, too: for example, you really feel the difficulty the two protagonists experience when wading through the deep mud of Passchendaele.

Story-wise, *Memories Retold* sees you constantly flip between two characters: Harry is a young, naive Canadian engaged by the gruff and rather self-seeking Major Barrett to generate a photographic record of the war. Kurt, meanwhile, is a German we first encounter working in a zeppelin factory. On hearing that many of his son's regiment have been killed, he becomes overwhelmed by an urge to find out if he is still alive, so enlists.

Marvellous team-up

The narrative has a fable-like quality (particularly when both Harry and Kurt find themselves together and bonding with animals), but it still manages to ring true. More importantly, it explores important wartime themes, such as losing family members, the gulf between seeking glory and the squalid reality of war, commitment (or otherwise) to the reasons for going to

short cut

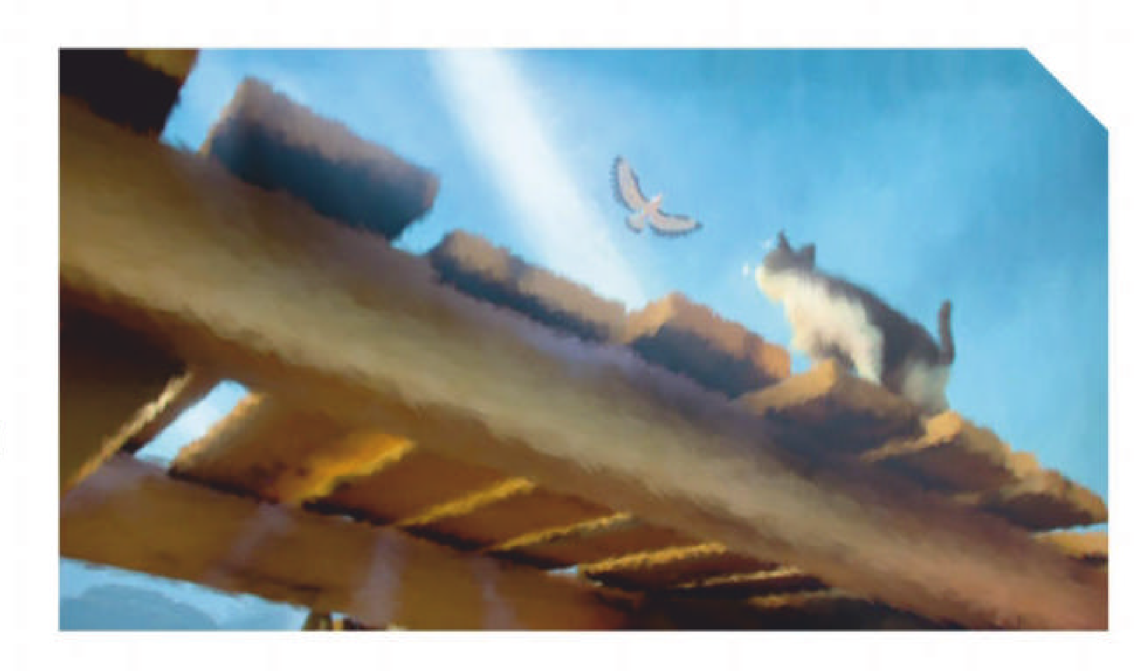
WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click-style, story-based evocation of the first modern global conflict.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Emotional, impressionistic and with a fable-like quality: yet it maintains the ring of truth.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Anyone for whom the First World War is merely a barely-remembered war which happened a century ago.

"It harnesses the storytelling power of videogames to full effect"

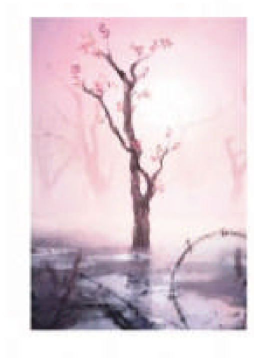
FAR LEFT The 'brush strokes' effect is not only beautiful but blurs some of the horrors.





ABOVE Bonding with animals helps the characters find humanity.

LEFT The action takes place on sea as well as on dry land.



war, buttoned-up social sensibilities of the age, the dangers of seeing an enemy as a real person and the intensity of friendships that arise during war.

Hidden depths

It's sensitively worked and frequently very affecting – as well as extremely educational, and unafraid to bust myths (for example, Harry strikes up a friendship with an Indian soldier, one of a vast number of often overlooked subcontinental troops to have fought in the Great War). It takes in a number of locations, with Vimy and Passchendaele to the fore, and builds up to two possible, hugely emotional, endings as the Armistice finally arrives.

In terms of gameplay, *Memories Retold* substitutes variety for fast-twitch action. Harry has photography duties to fulfil, which often involve ducking and diving to avoid snipers and elements of stealth. Kurt, an engineer, must fix various items of equipment and eavesdrop on the enemy from tunnels beneath the trenches. Both characters must solve puzzles and navigate story-altering conversations; you must also help Kurt with the letters he writes to his wife and ailing daughter, which will colour their view of him.

Plus there are large amounts of collectibles, represented as notes, hidden around the levels, which give you access to real artefacts from the war, each with an accompanying story, such as scanned photos, posters and signs. Collectively, they constitute a huge and sobering library that conveys the scale of the war. And they add considerable replay value, which is welcome since, in keeping with its price-tag, *Memories Retold* is pretty short at roughly six hours' gameplay.

Memories Retold is a beautifully constructed vignette which harnesses the storytelling power of videogames to full effect, and provides a visceral and emotional depiction of that bloody war. The recent centenary of the 1918 Armistice at least brought the Great War back into the public consciousness, but there's a prevailing feeling that in recent years, a generation has grown up largely unaware of what took place between 1914 and 1918. *11-11: Memories Retold* redresses that imbalance in an immersive manner which the young, in particular, will be able to relate to, without glossing over or whitewashing any of the Great War's more horrifying aspects. It's a powerful educational tool indeed. ■

THE MUSIC OF 11-11

11-11: Memories Retold gains even more impact from its soundtrack, which manages to be both winsome and haunting, feeding beautifully off the peaks and troughs of the storyline. It was composed by renowned French composer Olivier Deriviere, and recorded by the Philharmonia Orchestra at Abbey Road Studios, with some added choral sequences (for which Deriviere himself wrote the French lyrics) that ramp up the emotions at key moments.



OXM VERDICT

An effective, immersive, emotional and unbiased depiction of World War I.





PUBLISHER FOCUS INTERACTIVE / **DEVELOPER** CYANIDE STUDIOS / **RELEASE DATE** OUT NOW / **COST** £49.99/$59.99

Call Of Cthulhu

LOVE LOVECRAFT? YOU'LL LOVE THIS... **CHRIS BURKE**

"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!" No, that's not predictive texting going wrong, but the cultists' mantra in HP Lovecraft's classic tale that gives its name to this survival horror. Cthulhu is a gigantic, evil cosmic entity with an octopus head, dragon wings, claws and a humanoid body, who's sleeping in a sunken city called R'lyeh. That unpronounceable mantra means "in his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu lies dreaming". Shhh! We don't want to wake him up now, do we? Or... do we?

Choice is at the centre of this stab at first-person Lovecraftian horror, and how you choose to play the game will shape character interactions, narrative branches and, ultimately, the fate of mankind. No pressure.

It's 1924, and as Boston private eye Edward Pierce, you take on a case for an industrialist who wants you to investigate the death of his daughter Sarah and her family on the island of Darkwater, off the coast of New England. Sarah Hawkins was an artist with disturbing vision; her paintings oddly prophetic and depicting some seriously wacko imagery.

Darkwater is a remote, jagged reef island whose business used to be whaling, and is now full of drunk, unemployed fishermen. From here, you must piece together what happened to Sarah, talking to NPCs, searching for clues and piecing together events using Pierce's detective skills. When prompted at certain key locations, you enter into a reconstruction mode – similar to *Batman Arkham Knight* – to reconstruct a still, ghostly image of events past. Clues revealed lead to individuals and locations, such as warehouses on the dilapidated harbourside, the sprawling Hawkins mansion and a creepy old hospital.

Ghastly visions

Pierce is hampered by his own deteriorating mental health. He's troubled by weird, likely-prophetic dreams featuring as-yet faceless cultists conducting bizarre rituals in dank caves. He's also up against some pretty strange locals, violent bootleggers and incompetent police. But there are also friendlies who will help you. Interactions with all of these NPCs will reveal clues, open up dialogue branches, and allow you to progress in different ways. There's no manual save, so you can't reload if you think you got it wrong – instead you're stuck with the choices you've made for better or worse. Replaying the game from the start did indeed reveal some interesting different outcomes and ways to get around blocked paths or reveal other clues.

Role-playing is in the DNA of the game (it's based on Chaosium's brilliant tabletop RPG) and you build up skills with acquired character points which will allow you access to certain narrative or action choices. For example, having a higher Investigation skill will allow you to pick locks. If you don't have that, those locked doors will remain shut, requiring you to take a different approach. Eloquence will

short cut

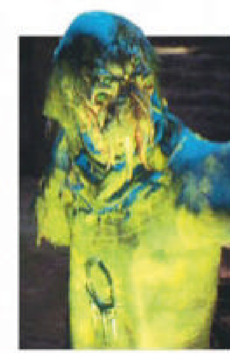
WHAT IS IT?
First-person survival horror based on the work of 1920s horror genius HP Lovecraft.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
Call Of Cthulhu: Dark Corners Of The Earth, on original Xbox, *Alan Wake* and other thoughtful survival horror games.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Fans of Lovecraft, games involving investigation and horror games.

Lovecraft is famous for his 'Cthulhu Mythos' though he never used the term, calling it the 'Arkham Cycle'. No relation to Batman





LEFT Captain Fitzroy is a salty old sea dog. Which you can tell from his hat.

"Visually the game is atmospherically lit and rich in detail"

FAR LEFT "Actually, know what? I changed my mind, I'm not going in there!"

RIGHT Things can get a little strange in the mind of the game's protagonist Edward Pierce.



allow you to charm your way through a situation, making some NPCs more pliable. Medicine and Occult knowledge cannot be allocated CP, though, but are built up through your discoveries.

Pierce has a gun, though you'll rarely be firing it. Even if in some situations your gamer sensibilities make you yearn for that gun-sight, the first half of the game features no 'action' as such. Most often you'll be wielding your Zippo or a gas lantern to help you see into the gloom as you hunt for clues.

The horror…

This is a survival horror game first and foremost, and there are some early jump-scares – things seen lit briefly by a lightning flash, for example – but in the best traditions of HP, the terror is in the unravelling of the truth, and the effect it has on Pierce's sanity.

Some sections are played out in surreal dream sequences involving dimension-bending puzzles – but these aren't enjoyable or challenging as most of the time you're simply forced to guess. Puzzles in the normal world are similarly trial and error. Whether it's a choice of four control-wheels to turn, or one of four paths to take, there are no clues to be gleaned, and each time the game had us fail three times before our very last choice bore fruit.

Visually the game is rich in detail and atmospherically lit, evoking both the time period, dark foreshadowing and harsh coastal geography, though panning the camera around can be a little jerky. Characters models are slightly spoiled by some poor mouth-syncing, while during conversations NPCs have a tendency to flail their arms around over-expressively. The voice acting is decent, though; it's well-scripted with the principal characters' emotions and motivations believable. The game's denouement – however you choose it will end – is faithful to Lovecraft's work and its sense of hopelessness in the face of vast, incomprehensible cosmic forces acting on the will of man.

At around 10-12 hours it's not long, but it does have a story to tell and it's a nice break from all those open-world games eating your life up right now. ■

WHERE'S R'LYEH?

Cthulhu's resting place, the sunken city of R'lyeh, is discovered by a Norwegian sailor in Lovecraft's story. Its location is in the South Pacific, and is considered by some Lovecraft scholars to be round about Point Nemo, the furthest point away from land. This mid-ocean nowhere is known as the "oceanic pole of inaccessibility" – roughly 1,000 miles equidistantly between the Pitcairn islands, Easter islands and Maher Island off the coast of Antarctica. Given that it's reckoned only 5% of the ocean has been explored, who's to say Cthulhu isn't out there somewhere? Shiver.



OXM VERDICT
An atmospheric survival horror with an engaging story that'll appeal most to Lovecraft fans.





NEXT MONTH

CRACKDOWN 3

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It may not seem long since we were reviewing Lara Croft's latest adventure in **OXM**, but we feel it's been unfairly buried under a collapsing temple's worth of new games – and figured it was time to revisit the third in the newest *Tomb Raider* series. We love some of the ideas in Shadow Of The Tomb Raider (p96), such as the sliding difficulty scale, but will the slickness and clever touches be enough to help the game become a classic? Talking of which, our Retrospective feature, in which we recall classic past Xbox games, this month focuses on Silent Hill: Homecoming (p100), a more 'westernised' entry in the series that appeared on Xbox 360 back in 2008. We also take a look at an intriguing game you may not be familiar with, Hand Of Fate 2. It's a deck-building, ah no, wait, an RPG… no, it's a survival game – ah, just go ahead and read why we're fans on page 98. *A Way Out* was one of our favourite cooperative games of 2018, and we revisit our favourite scene in the entire game in Why I Love the hospital chase in A Way Out (p106). Finally, it's always raining outside **OXM** Towers. Being Brits, rain is a major source of conversation and a big part of our lives. So grab your brolleys as on page 108 this month we run down the 10 Best Games for lovers of rain. Drip, drip, drip. Adam! The roof's leaking again!



096



100



106



108

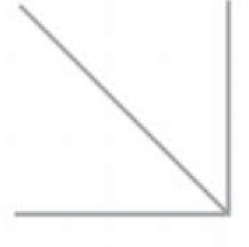


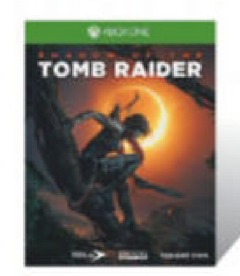
Keep an eye out for this badge over the next few pages: it indicates when a game of old can be booted up in shiny Xbox One-o-vision.

CHECK OUT OUR VAST LIBRARY OF XBOX FEATURES AT WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM



NOW PLAYING





Shadow Of The Tomb Raider's sliding difficulty was one of its more intriguing ideas, but did it work? ALEX NELSON

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / **DEVELOPER** EIDOS MONTRÉAL / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** SEPTEMBER 2018



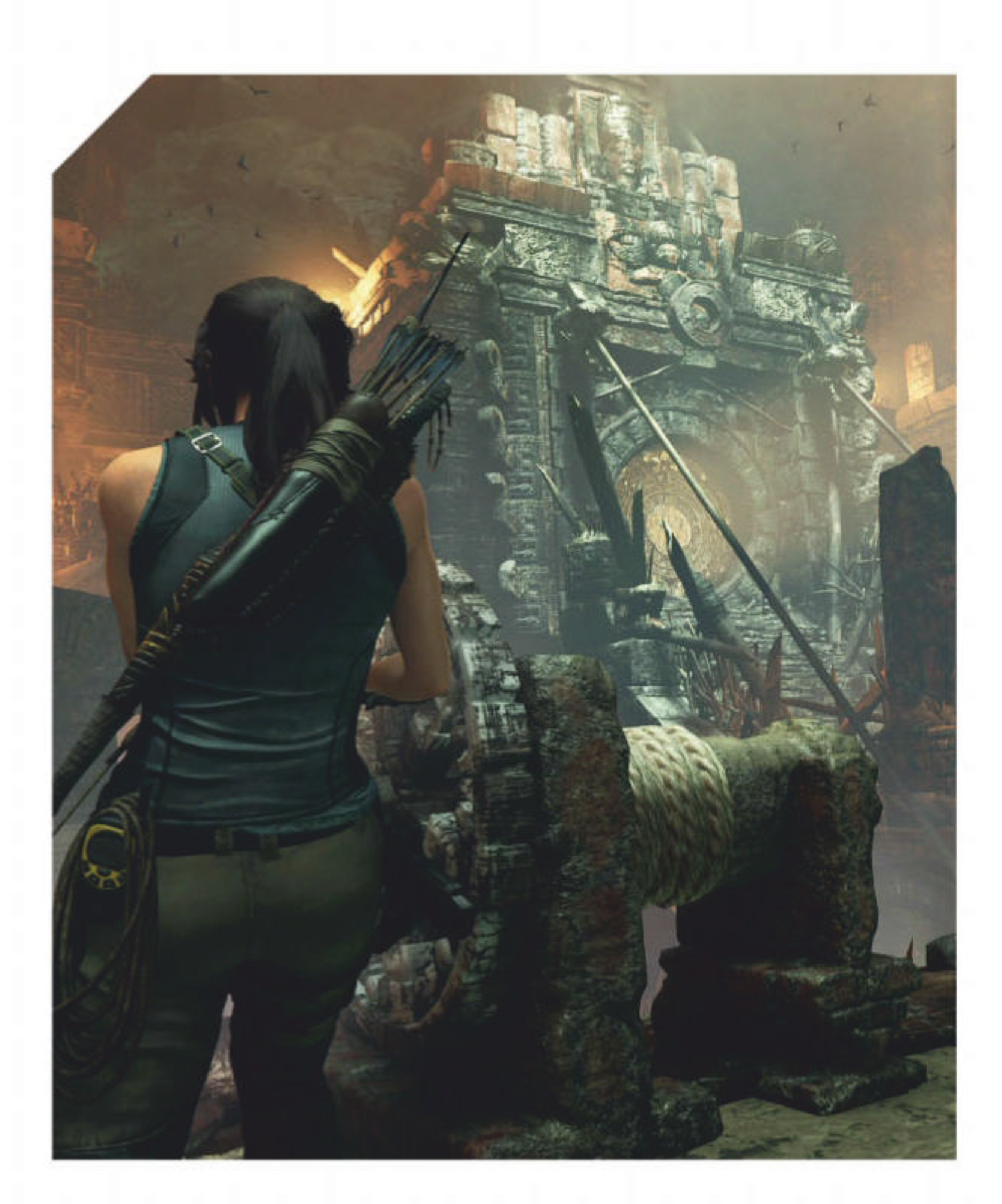
Looking back on the year that was 2018, it feels like *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider*'s September release has been rubbed out of memory somewhat by bigger, more event-like game releases.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey captured people's attentions for weeks on end, then *Red Dead 2* came along and was even more of an immersive open-world experience that held the attention of the zeitgeist much longer. Lara's latest? Yeah, it was good, and had people talking until Ubisoft's historical epic came along, but any lasting legacy has been diminished. That's a shame, because *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* is – for the most part – solid.

Yes, while the story is a garbled mish-mash of Incan folklore and occult factions, wholly confused about whether it wants to be a blockbuster action epic or a thoughtful exploration puzzler, if you liked the previous entries, this one will have you similarly entertained. There's some good ideas in there: I found myself pining for more than one section in which you play as a child Lara, where the platforming gets macro and you're faced with just as much danger, only you might be balance-beaming over a sandpit, not a pit of deadly wolves. Something else that got people talking before the game's release was its sliding difficulty scales, which allow players to customise their experience by adjusting the difficulty in combat, puzzles and exploration.

Easy combat means enemies go down quicker and resources are more copious. Simple puzzles give you hints and markers when you might need them, and painless exploration means your critical path is always clear. Ramp those three up to hard, and you can expect bullet-spongier enemies, hintless puzzles and nothing telling you where you need to go next.

It can be tough to get difficulty in games right. On the one hand, you might want a stiff challenge to test your mettle, but at the same time, you don't want things to be too testing that you come across a virtual impasse on a regular basis.



Debris slide

Things shouldn't feel unfair either, the game should encourage you to master its systems and use your previous experiences to overcome the next hurdle – when a game pulls the rug out from under your feet by changing things dramatically and shoving you into a brand-new scenario (like a particularly cheap boss fight), it can feel disappointingly dishonest. But somewhat dishearteningly, *Shadow* just isn't all that difficult even when you've opted for the 'Rite of Passage' difficulty, which locks all three to 'very hard' and does away with checkpoints, requiring you to seek out *Souls*-like bonfires for a well-earned save.

At those higher difficulty levels, resources are abundant enough that you'll rarely find yourself scrabbling around for ammo, and once you've got the game's shallow stealth systems figured out, you'll be deadly huntressing your way through the game's relatively few combat encounters with ease. Because of this, the game never gave me reason to splash out and fill out Lara's skill tree, and I actively stopped cashing in Skill Points for new abilities at a certain point (why bother upgrading my bow and arrow skills when I maxed out an assault rifle a few hours back?).



The game seems to be intent on pushing you forward through an action-packed campaign as much as possible. But there's a disconnect between a *Tomb Raider* game that favours exploration over combat – as *Shadow* does – and one that wants you to buff Lara up into a merciless killer as quickly as possible. The option to adjust puzzle difficulty in a game is one I can't remember seeing in recent times but playing *Shadow* it slowly dawned on me why that might be – it doesn't really work.

Setting it to easy will have Lara pointing out what the next course of action may be through not-so-subtle hints, and your Survival Instincts vision will reveal the items and mechanical wotnots you'll need to make it through; it saps the challenge away almost entirely.

Puzzling options

On hard, the puzzles are almost too hard. It's all well and good that videogames' worlds get more lifelike and 'lived in', which essentially means more clutter strewn about to give the impression of a real-world place, but when you're looking for the next piece of a puzzle through a filter of centuries-old, South American detritus, it can be difficult to see where the next puzzle-critical object is.

"I had to sneakily adjust the difficulty to allow me to reveal items with my Survival Instincts"

Several times I had to sneakily adjust the difficulty to allow me to reveal items with my Survival Instincts, which confirmed I'd got a puzzle's solution in my head, I just couldn't see what it was I knew I should be looking for.

Unlike a dedicated puzzle game like *Portal* or *QUBE*, there's no consistent logic to *Tomb Raider*'s mentally challenging sections, no central concept that's gradually expanded upon. So you've no chance to learn the 'rules' and use them to your advantage: one minute you might be raising and lowering water levels, the next you could be using the wind to manipulate swinging pendulums.

Few of the Tombs allow you to make mistakes either, playing out in a typically linear action-adventure game fashion where you're not so much working things out as making your way through a room, stopping occasionally to complete the next task, usually telegraphed to you by some heavy-handed design. But there are a few good ones in *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* – most notably one involving light beams and mirrors and moving platforms – that give you room to make wrong assumptions about their solutions and forcing you to backtrack to undo your mistakes. Solving them is made all the more satisfying.

Shadow Of The Tomb Raider is still worth playing. It's entertaining enough, and has that sweet AAA backing behind it to make it a slick, big-budget videogame. It all looks and plays nicely – though occasionally Lara's floaty handling coupled with an unclear path forward thanks to those difficulty sliders did lead me to an unexpected death – and the few bouts of combat there all feel good. It's just shame that the final instalment of Lara's 'origins' trilogy concludes with less of a bang than its previous two entries, and it already feels like a *Tomb Raider* reboot could be on the cards – just five years after the previous one. ■

WHAT IS IT?
The final instalment of Lara's origins trilogy is let down by stale gameplay, but it's still a bombastic action-adventure affair.

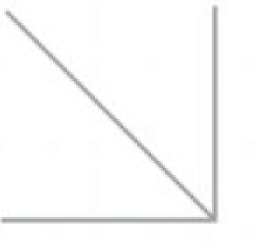
ABOVE Even at its hardest setting, *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* is an easy game to get through.

FAR LEFT The game's murky atmosphere and rubble-strewn environments can make it difficult to work out where you need to head next.

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NOW PLAYING





Trying to describe **Hand Of Fate 2** is impossible, and that's why it's so brilliant

HAL TARRARE

PUBLISHER DEFIANT DEVELOPMENT / **DEVELOPER** DEFIANT DEVELOPMENT / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** NOVEMBER 2017

I've found myself vaguely dreading the notion of someone asking me what game I've got on the go at the moment. "Playing anything good?" Here's where I'd smile, because I'm playing something very good. "Yes, actually, *Hand Of Fate 2*!" About here is where I'd begin to realise the ramifications of what I've said, and my smile would drop. "Oh yeah, what d'you do in that, then?" It's at this point that I'd totally lose confidence, because Defiant Development's second crack at this series is among the most bafflingly convoluted gaming inventions of recent years. Explaining it is a *nightmare*.

I mean on the most basic level, you could call it a deck-building game. After all, it's played across a table with an AI character who deals you cards, rewards you with more cards, and asks you to play again with better combinations of cards. But then again, those cards actually represent a dungeon-crawling RPG – some represent locations and encounters, others weapons, or enemy types, or companion characters. But, when you think about it, isn't this a text adventure at heart? After all, actually playing that RPG is a matter of reading miniaturised stories of fantasy adventure – fighting goblins, looting treasure, taking down evil empires – with twists and turns based on your responses to those situations.

But reaching those card-contained stories scattered on the tabletop? Well that most often comes down to survival game resource management. Have you got enough food to make it to the next town? Do you risk spending your scarce coin on a shiny new weapon when your HP's so low? But wait, your HP's only that low because this is *also* an *Arkham*-like brawler, occasionally transforming you, your items, and your enemies into muscly little 3D models, and asking you to smash out combos and counters to get through it all. And when you've died or finished a campaign? Well then it takes on the form of a roguelike, offering you new ways to play, or special objectives, even as you fundamentally do the same things again. I'm exhausted just thinking about how Defiant pitched this thing in the first place.



"No matter how hard the game is to explain, Hand Of Fate 2 is somehow never confusing to play"

WHAT IS IT?

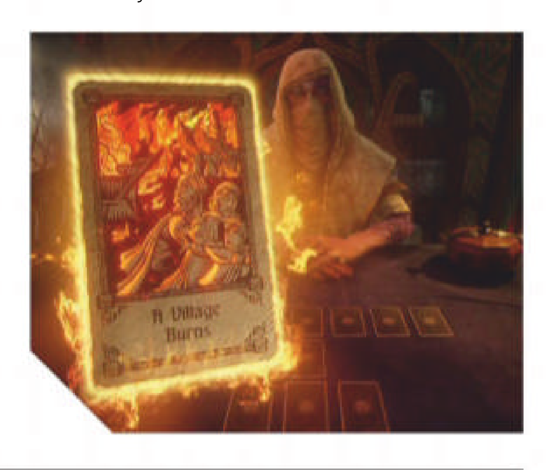
A magnificent hodgepodge of ideas drawn from other videogames and far beyond, that somehow coalesces into something special.

Practical magic

The mad genius at work here is that, no matter how hard it is to explain, *Hand Of Fate 2* is somehow never confusing to play. After a short tutorial campaign, you're immediately thrown into the giddy labyrinth of the game proper, and you'll have a handle on it immediately. It's a knotty little thing, performing the time travel trick of truly excellent design by somehow making a bitesize structure into an unbelievable timesink.

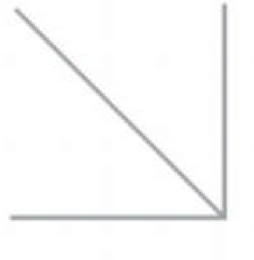
It looks beautiful, too. It's very easy to imagine another studio adopting a much more minimal aesthetic and achieving similar results, but *Hand Of Fate 2* is frequently gorgeous. The tabletop itself is appealingly tactile, from the wood-cut map you choose campaigns from, to the chunky golden miniature that represents your character. Its battlegrounds are pleasingly varied, and often lit like fantasy novel covers. Best of all, there's a real childlike magic to seeing a simple card you've picked up suddenly transformed into 3D items.

The maxim that 'less is more' simply doesn't apply to *Hand Of Fate 2*. It's a generic gumbo, ideas tossed into the pot from any number of disparate sources, each one making the rest more excellent as a result. There is simply nothing else like it. You should play *Hand Of Fate 2*, too. Maybe just avoid any conversations about it. ■





NOW PLAYING





We revisit a misspent youth playing **Ninja Gaiden Black** and try to recreate some of that old black magic **ALEX SPENCER**

PUBLISHER TECMO / **DEVELOPER** TEAM NINJA / **FORMAT** XBOX / **RELEASE DATE** SEPTEMBER 2005

Once upon a time, when I was young and still had all of my faculties, I bested *Ninja Gaiden*. The game was the *Dark Souls* of its day – an unforgiving hack-and-slash where the smallest mistake could mean instant death. The victory was a rare jewel in my gaming crown because, over the years, I more or less gave up on games that required any kind of twitch reflexes.

And so, when I pick up the Dragon Sword for the first time in over a decade, those muscles have atrophied. These days, I'm less Master Ninja – to borrow terminology from the difficulty modes introduced in Black, a slightly expanded version of the original game – and more Ninja Dog.

Ryu Hayabusa, meanwhile, has aged much better than I have. He still moves with the grace of a murderous Mario, and it's an utter joy to control him as he sprints along the sides of buildings, backflips off walls, even skims across the surface of a lake like Jesus doing the 200 metres.

It's incredible how much of the game is still etched into my memory. I can trace the shape of its levels well enough to track down every secret tucked away on a high ledge. The introduction of teleporting ninja wizards – able to trouble you from afar with fireballs or pop up behind you and stab you – rekindles an old hatred that has apparently burned deep inside me, untended, for all this time. I even remember the button combo required to skip the rather interminable cutscenes.

Double-edged sword

This ingrained memory propels me through most of the first level. I reach the boss at its end almost unscathed. Huh, I think, maybe this isn't so hard after all. Maybe I've actually gotten better at games with time – I've certainly played far more of them.



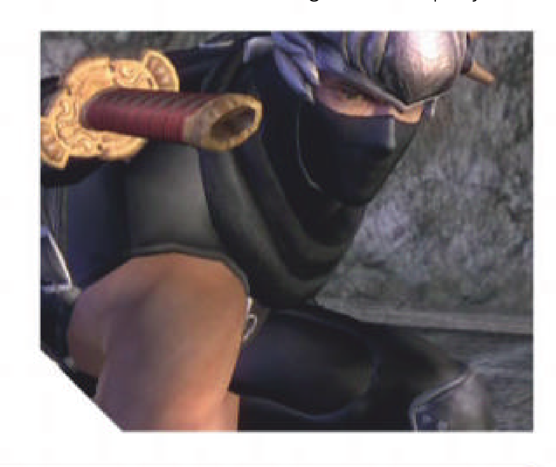
"I even remember the button combo required to skip the rather interminable cutscenes"

And then that boss, a nunchuk wielder who is also apparently Ryu's uncle, spanks me like a naughty child. It's a fair fight, though, and a great way of teaching the intricacies of combat and blocking. The same cannot be said of the next boss, a samurai. On an unkillable horse, with an infinitely-regenerating entourage of those accursed wizards. At which point, I realise not all of *Ninja Gaiden*'s difficulty is well-earned. The game's camera is one thing that firmly dates it, back to an era where third-person games often struggled to keep up with the action. With multiple ninjas on screen at once, it quickly becomes chaos.

More than once, this boss fight ends with me killed by an attack I couldn't possibly have seen coming. But, after half a dozen game-overs and accepting that I need to chug an entire inventory's worth of health elixirs, I emerge victorious. From there, it's fairly smooth sailing – if 'sailing' is the right word for battling on top of a zeppelin with a giant cybernetic eggman. The enemy arsenal grows to include pistols, riot shields and inexplicably electrified blades, but happily bullets can be deflected with my blade, so nothing really fazes me.

Eventually, inevitably, on the streets of Tairon, I make one of those small mistakes I mentioned earlier. And find myself back at a checkpoint outside the city limits, half an hour of progress wiped away. It's infuriating, a trip back to game design of the early millennium, and as I schlep my way back to town, I wonder: was my younger self actually good at this game, or did I just have a lot more time. And a lot fewer games to play? ■

WHAT IS IT?
A tricky third-person action game from the developers of – and featuring the same embarrassing female character design as – *Dead Or Alive*.



RETROSPECTIVE
SILENT HILL: HOMECOMING







Silent Hill: Homecoming embodied the west's dominance in videogames a decade ago

ROBERT ZAK

PUBLISHER KONAMI DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT / **DEVELOPER** DOUBLE HELIX GAMES / **FORMAT** XBOX 360



The *Silent Hill* series thrives on manifestation and symbolism. It's a Rorschach chart whose black ink drips off the page and into our reality, coagulating into terrifying abominations straight out of Freud's nightmares. *Homecoming*, the first big-console *Silent Hill* game developed by a western studio, lost much of the nuance that gave its predecessors their dark powers. But as a product, it too is a kind of abomination; a fascinating cross-cultural one, revealing to us the fears and neuroses of its publisher, and the psyche of the gaming landscape at the time.

For the first time since the days of the Atari in the '70s and '80s, the pendulum of videogame influence had swung formidably to the west in 2008. The Xbox 360 was making the most of its headstart on the PS3, which was stunted by awkward architecture for development and a lack of early exclusives. The defining games of this era were *Halo*, *Gears Of War* and *GTA IV*, while the horror genre was best represented by the likes of *Dead Space* and *Condemned 2*.

'West is best'

The Xbox 360's low uptake in Japan meant that Japanese developers had skipped the early years of that console generation. From Software had yet to embark on the *Souls* series, Platinum Games was yet to dazzle us with *Bayonetta*, while now-hit series like *Monster Hunter* and *Yakuza* were yet to really get a foothold outside their home country. With the exception of Nintendo and its ageless stable of mascots, it looked for a while like that kooky, parochial school of Japanese game design had no place in the modern world of gritty verisimilitude.

The westernisation of the *Silent Hill* IP had already begun a few years prior to *Homecoming*. With *Silent Hill* game sales declining with each successive release, Konami disbanded Team Silent between *Silent Hill 4* (2004) and *Silent Hill: Origins* (2007), ostensibly in the hope that a western developer would be more attuned to whatever was needed to give the games wider appeal. *Origins* was made by British studio Climax Action, and was preceded in 2006 by a Canadian *Silent Hill* movie. The reasonable success of these forays from the series' Japanese roots likely persuaded Konami that this was the way to go.

Which brings us to *Silent Hill: Homecoming* in 2008, developed by American studio Double Helix Games. It follows Alex Shepherd, a man returning from military duty to his hometown of Shepherd's Glen. He finds the town largely deserted, populated by only a few sullen characters and a host of twisted monstrosities – as perverse and brilliantly designed as ever. Alex's little brother Josh is among a host of children to have gone missing, and finding him becomes the thrust of the game.

As per *Silent Hill* tradition, the action in *Homecoming* flowed turbulently between the 'normal' (such as it is) Fog World and the industrial hellish dimension known as the Otherworld, transitioning v a the effect of reality flaking away like old cheap paint in high winds. Once in the Otherworld, Alex encounters the missing children's parents, who we later learn are part of a cult called 'The Order', which sacrifices children to keep the demonic forces appeased.

Between solving cryptic-as-ever puzzles and battering regular baddies, you fought some of the series' best bosses in the Otherworld – demons born of the parents' guilt and the manner in which they killed their children. These creatures – such as a giant marionette whose porcelain flesh you smash through to reveal the sinewy muscle underneath, or a human centipede creature (before

KING OF THE HILL

At the concept stage, *Homecoming* was going to be a trilogy, revolving around kids Josh Shepherd and Alessa Gillespie.







Human Centipede even existed) – gave *Homecoming* a degree of gruesome spectacle rarely seen in the series before, enhanced by the semi-functional new combat mechanics. The game existed for these grandstand moments.

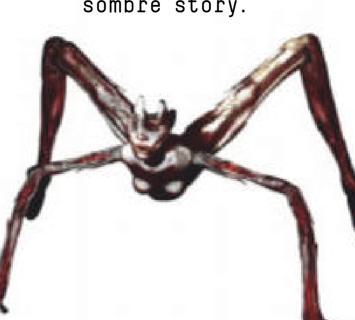
Jacob's tight-ladder

Homecoming didn't get off to a bad start, even if the start in question did entail a grungy replication of the hospital trolley scene from *Jacob's Ladder* as Alex gets carted through a hospital. Study this sequence carefully however, and you'd find the whole plot of the game codedly foreshadowed for you. If there's one theme that *Homecoming* successfully held onto, it's that nothing is meaningless, and everything can be framed as a projection of one character or another's psyche. Even the returning faceless nurses – now with teasingly short dresses and jiggling jugglies – can be contextualised through little lore, ahem, titbits you find scattered around the game.

You could deduce from the early going that the subtext of *Homecoming* would be the trauma of war, and the dangers of soldiers bringing their demons home after service. It would have been a fitting angle through which to apply the series' leitmotif of guilt and repression too, and would have helped justify why Alex was a much harder bastard than the grieving hubbies and pubescent teens of past entries. A product of a time when realism and action were a measure of quality in gaming, *Homecoming* joined the herd, implementing a proper aiming system, finishing moves, quick-time attacks and dodge-rolls.



ABOVE *Homecoming* had its share of grindhouse moments, giving a brash, crass counterpoint to its mostly sombre story.



But *Homecoming* never quite committed to its new mechanics, which failed to escape the stiffness of previous outings. The loading screens would drop little hints about timing your dodges and attacks, but really the best tactic was almost always to rain in quick-quick-heavy attack combos to keep enemies in a state of perpetual stumbling. The occasional dodge would come in handy to hit a defensive enemy from an angle, but for the most part this system encouraged aggression, which wasn't conducive to the kind of dreamy horror that *Silent Hill* always espoused. On the other hand, ammo was a rare commodity, and some of the better guns weren't even on the critical path, so it didn't entirely abandon its 'survival' side.

The town of Shepherd's Glen was in practice little more than a series of wide foggy corridors patrolled by skinned dogs and ash-spitting 'smogs'. Its greatest failure was that it didn't feel like a once lived-in place. Where earlier titles had the iconic Devil's Pitstop diner, or the Heaven's Night bar with its lonely, buzzing neon lights, *Homecoming* lacked the distinctive locations and vestiges of humanity that gave previous games that distinctive sense of loss.

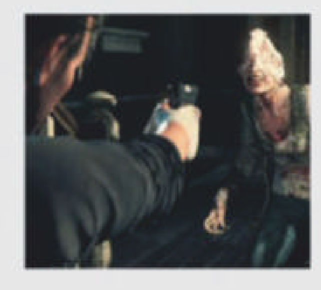
Not that the game was bereft of introspective moments. Amidst the creaky action sequences and linear runs across towns and other dimensions, there was a healthy amount of world-building littered around. Old newspaper cuttings and ominous children's drawings steadily built up a feeling – if not quite picture – of what was going on, while the troubled relationship between Alex and his family was captured if you chose to wander around his home.

Alex's parents' house was one of the few areas in the game where you felt like you were exploring a textured, tangible place. Set over two compact storeys, a basement and

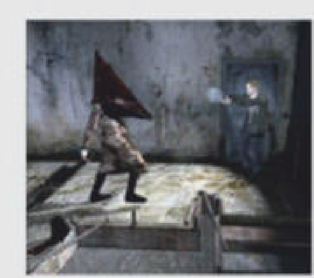
"Moments of subtlety were drowned out in a game that preferred the gory, grindhouse horror route – the American Way"

SILENT THRILLS

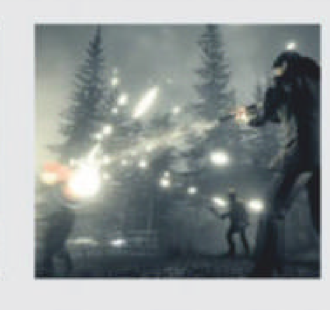
Homecoming had too many ideas. Here are three games that did the whole nightmarish, interdimensional flavour of horror more successfully.



THE SPIRIT IS WILLING
THE EVIL WITHIN 2
Shinji Mikami's pet project feels spiritually like more of a *Silent Hill 2* successor than most of the actual series. Horrific stuff.



ON ITS OWN
SILENT HILL 2
One of the few horror games that doesn't feel derivative to cinema. A uniquely unsettling horror about loss and guilt.



FIRE POWER
ALAN WAKE
With a combat focus and linear story about interlocking dimensions, this is what *Homecoming* could have been.

a backyard, it contrasted with the tunnel-like design of the rest of the game's spaces, letting you rummage around and gather flashes of the Shepherd family's life. You could examine photos, drawings and toys, accompanied by pithy dialogue that established Alex's family relationships. While the game's over-reliance on locked doors to guide you felt like outdated cruft from the Team Silent days, in the house these locked doors actually fulfilled a narrative role by making you feel unwelcome – a stranger in your own domain.

Making things even more unsettling in the house was the vacant presence of Alex's mother, sitting in the living room and barely acknowledging him when he arrives. The emotional void between them and the sombre memories you'd uncover in the house turned what should have been a space of solace into one of hopeless sadness, its lack of sanctuary punctuated by the fact that monsters literally lurk in the basement.

Cold comforts

After that sobering first visit, *Homecoming* (such an apt title at that point) teases a story about a broken, imbalanced family, though this – and Alex's soldier background – prove to be false leads, abandoned in the final act in favour of culty nonsense and the revelation that Alex accidentally killed his brother in a boating accident.

Another elegant snippet occurred in the Silent Hill Grand Hotel. You'd hear the voice of a woman humming a lullaby as you explored its decrepit halls, before coming to a pitch-black hole in a door where the disembodied voice asked you to recover three 'memories' for her. Throughout the hotel, you'd steadily uncover the woman's story – an affair she had with another man while her husband was succumbing to terminal illness.



TOP After so many years of the series trudging through fog, by *Homecoming* the trope began to lose its unnerving magic.

ABOVE The game is full of well realised, ghastly monsters.

By the time you return to her, you have context of why she's stuck here, though whether she's a ghost or simply broken by guilt is never clarified. Saying her goodbyes with a nebulous laugh, the sequence echoed the tone of earlier *Silent Hill* games; a ghostly, poetic form of expression arising when adept Japanese devs make games set in the west.

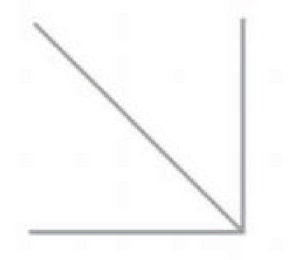
But these moments of subtlety were drowned out in a game that preferred the gory, grindhouse horror route – the American Way. The few characters you'd meet weren't your typical *Silent Hill* enigmas with unclear intentions, but B-movie archetypes who you could quickly categorise as a friend, enemy or lover. Sequences where you'd blast your way out of a police station with shotguns alongside a wise-cracking, furrow-browed black cop, or fight a sadistic mechanic with a circular saw, were the stuff of zombie-apocalypse flicks and video nasties.

Where the heroes of previous games reacted to new monstrosities with strange acceptance, Alex's face would contort into looks of almost comical terror. For a *Silent Hill* game, it was all too delineated; a tale of self-aware ordinary people colliding with the demonic rather than a dreamstate where real world, Otherworld, friend, enemy and projection were always shrouded in uncertainty.

Homecoming's tone could have worked. It suited the straightforward, well-paced narrative and the more varied combat. The problem is that the game never fully committed to this new angle. Its combat-orientated mechanics were half-baked, town exploration was dreary, and the plot abandoned its most promising leads, deciding instead to task the player with bringing down the series' long-running cult that manifested itself here as a bunch of men running around in saggy-bummed hazmat suits and gas masks. Filled with people with clear motives and crude exposition, *Silent Hill* just wasn't that silent any more. ■



HOW TO... MANAGE YOUR GAMING TIME



Become the master of your schedule, and finally get all those massive games finished **ROBIN VALENTINE**

YOU WILL NEED AN XBOX ONE / A SHAMEFUL GAMING BACKLOG **OPTIONAL** AN IRON WILL / NO SOCIAL LIFE

In the games industry today, size is everything. Gone is the era of the short-but-spectacular shooter – now, any AAA title worth its salt is expected to provide a sprawling open world ready to suck up 100 hours of your time.

How on earth are we mere mortals supposed to keep up? Played at a leisurely pace, you could spend half the year chipping away at *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* – but the gaming gods allowed us only three weeks to speed through it before *Red Dead Redemption 2* launched. Now, not long after, we've already got *Just Cause 4*, *Darksiders III*, *Hitman 2*, *Starlink* and more fighting for our time, with *Kingdom Hearts III*, *Crackdown 3*, *Anthem* and *Sekiro* all waiting on the horizon for early next year

If you want to keep up – and actually see the final cutscenes of some of these beasts – you'll need to take control of your gaming schedule. Sure, your quality time with your Xbox One may be your chance to relax and have fun, but that doesn't mean it can't also be ruthlessly efficient. With our simple tips and tricks, you can turn that backlog of half-finished games into a stack of proudly conquered worlds, and finally understand what your friends mean when they reference *that* twist ending...





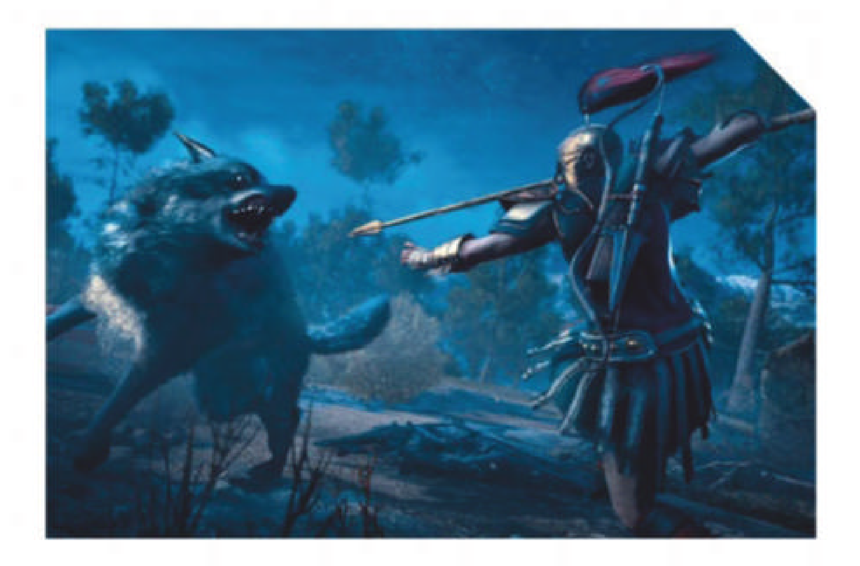
Check Xbox achievement stats, and you'll find few people actually finish games.

01
SET YOUR PRIORITIES

First, you need to pick out the games you *really* want to finish. Focus is important – you can't complete everything, and not everything is worth completing, so cut any titles that aren't deserving of your precious time. Do you play a lot of multiplayer games that don't have any endpoint? Maybe it's time to take a break from battle royales and deathmatches until you've gotten the Wild West under control, eh?

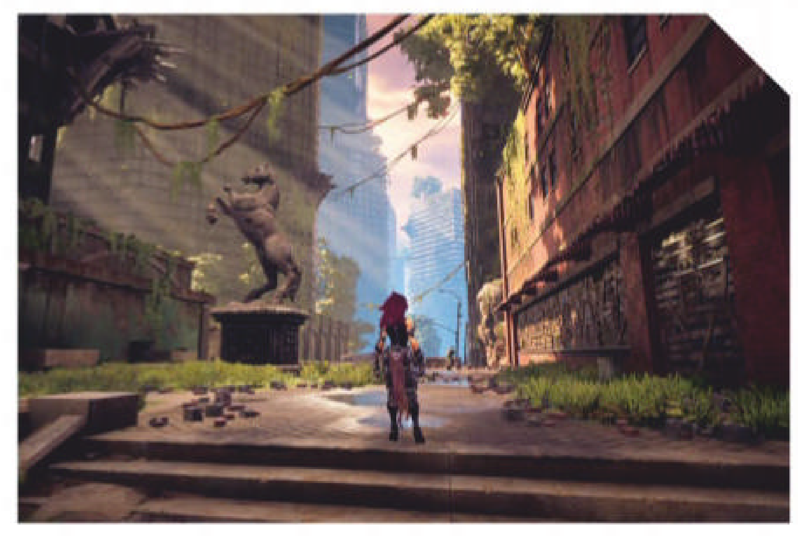
02
BE PATIENT

You don't have to grab every game as it comes out, and you don't have to finish them all *right now*. This time of year is packed with new releases, but remember that it won't last. We understand that urge to be caught up with the releases everyone's talking about, but why not put some of your games aside to be played in leaner months, when you'll have the time to appreciate them?



03
PUT FUN FIRST

We waste so much of our precious gaming time doing things we don't really enjoy, out of a sense of completionism. Stop it. If you're bored of clearing out bandit camps, collecting herbs, or hunting legendary animals, don't keep doing it just to tick a few more icons off the map – sack them off. That's time you could be spending doing things that really interest you or, even better, pushing on to the end of the game.



04
CHOOSE YOUR SCHEDULE

Planning out your free time might feel weird, but setting even a rough schedule for your gaming can make all the difference – especially if you're easily distracted. Decide how much time you want to devote to each game per evening, or per week, and try to stick to it. It'll make your backlog less intimidating, too – don't think of your latest game as yet another 100-hour epic, think of it as an hour a night.

05
STICK TO A FEW GAMES

Play too many titles at once and you're going to have less fun with all of them. In each, you'll find yourself losing track of what's going on in the story and what goals you've set yourself, and, with control schemes getting more detailed than ever, forgetting how to play. The more games you add to the mix, the more you're slowing down your progress with all the others – try to keep it to just two or three max.

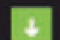


06
SORT YOUR LIFE OUT

The better organised the rest of your life is, the more time you'll have for gaming, so take a long hard look at your daily activities. Do you really need to spend that hour watching bad TV every night? Could you be getting those personal projects finished sooner if you scheduled them better? How much time are you wasting on social media? And do you really *need* a significant other?

APP-LY YOURSELF

There are loads of time-management apps out there that can help you take control of your time. We're fond of Habitica, which turns all your daily tasks into RPG quests. Every chore you get done or good habit you stick to earns you gold and experience points to level up your character and buy them new equipment. Get your friends involved, and you can even party up to take on elite boss monsters. What could be more appropriate than gamifying your life so you can spend more of your life playing games?



HOW TO...



STEP 1
Faking illness can get you a precious day off work for gaming – but you'll need to be convincing if you don't want your boss to catch on to your ploy.

STEP 2
Try calling them up from the bathroom, and groaning and flushing the toilet intermittently during the conversation – they won't ask questions.

STEP 3
For more shrewd bosses, you may need a touch of realism. Try eating tuna out of the bin the day before. Not too much though – the trick is to get ill, but not so ill you can't game.

STEP 4
Repeat this trick enough times and you may even get fired, freeing you from work entirely and allowing you the maximum amount of time for gaming. Ideal.

WHY I LOVE... THE HOSPITAL CHASE IN A WAY OUT



How **A Way Out** uses diverse gameplay and stellar cinematic techniques to deliver its most memorable scene **FRASER GILBERT**

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS / **DEVELOPER** HAZELIGHT STUDIOS / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** MARCH 2018

RIGHT This segment feels the most polished, and lasts longest in the memory.





Josef Fares' inventive co-op adventure *A Way Out* drew plaudits following its release earlier this year, featuring a memorable story, varied gameplay, and a brilliantly unique take on the action-adventure genre. The game, which sees the characters of Vincent and Leo escape from prison and go on the run, boasts a range of memorable set-pieces, with none more exhilarating than its hospital chase scene, encapsulating many of *A Way Out*'s strongest qualities.

The level takes place towards the latter part of the game, opening with a cutscene in which Vincent visits his newly-born daughter in hospital. The police have been tipped off as to the pair's location, however, and soon arrive at the building, spurring an emotional goodbye and daring escape. Both main characters dart off in different directions, marking the only notable time the game ditches its standard co-op mechanics in favour of a turn-by-turn approach.

In the next ten, frenetic minutes, Vincent and Leo find themselves engaging in everything from rapid quicktime fights to measured stealth sections. The sense of desperation is ever-apparent, and there's not a dull moment to be had – the result of *A Way Out*'s purposefully diverse approach to gameplay. This scene alone has you climbing buildings, fighting adversaries, stealthily hiding from the cops, and much, much more, all in the midst of rushing from room to room.

There are some fantastically creative design choices in *A Way Out*, and plenty of them feature as part of this hospital chase. The side-scrolling combat sequence, which sees Leo engage in short 2D-style fights with various foes, does a great job of making basic fighting feel impactful as a result of a perspective change. The grand finale, in which Vincent takes the wheel of a getaway vehicle, ramps up the drama significantly by implementing a slow-motion sequence, highlighting the carnage around him.

"The way the camera adapts to each carefully manufactured segment feels masterful in design"

WHAT IS IT?

A co-op only, action-adventure romp in which players assume the roles of convicts and escape from prison to track down a notorious crime boss.

Lights, action!

"My background as a filmmaker has helped me out with this game," Fares told OXM ahead of *A Way Out*'s release. "If you look at the cinematics, look at how the camera movements are, look at some of the gameplay ideas – how they are played in a sense. I have many ideas on how to take that even further." This is where the hospital chase scene excels most prominently. Fares utilises his experience as a film director to great effect, implementing a range of thrilling camera angles and unique perspectives to heighten the appeal. Most notably, the scene takes advantage of a single-shot structure, lasting the entire ten minutes. This means the camera never cuts away from the action, despite regularly switching between both characters.

The lack of a cutaway allows the momentum to remain hectic, replacing typical blackout segments with creative transitions. The camera takes a free-flowing approach as it moves through vents, ghosts between windows, and even makes use of surveillance footage to seamlessly switch between rooms. This leads to some tremendously impressive cinematography, and it also gives the scene a particularly high-budget feel.

The way the camera adapts to each carefully manufactured segment feels masterful in design. In one part, there's a stealth section in which you have to blend in with the other patients in the hospital. The camera almost feels like it's hiding with you, peering over the ledge to listen in on what the police are verbalising in the background. In another, there's a mini-chase sequence in which you're tasked with blocking a doorway with a bookcase, with the camera focusing on the door's window as an oncoming policeman approaches with speed. It's a credit to how meticulously detailed this scene is that you forget how limited the gameplay can be. It's filled with quicktime events aplenty, and even big fight scenes require little more than a tap of a button.

When *A Way Out* was undergoing its promotional period ahead of the game's release, the hospital chase scene featured prominently. It's no surprise – it's not only one of the most creatively ambitious segments in the game, but arguably the most gripping, too. I've introduced the game to numerous players since its release, and it's always the hospital scene that sets jaws dropping. In putting it together, Josef Fares and his team delivered one of the most thrilling action sequences of 2018. ■

ABOVE The action soon ramps up after the hospital scene, introducing epic shootouts and vehicle getaways.

→ WHAT GAMES DO YOU LOVE? SEND YOUR LUSTY THOUGHTS TO OXM@FUTURENET.COM



10 BEST GAMES FOR LOVERS OF RAIN ON XBOX

Fellow pluviophiles look no further, for OXM has you covered with a list of games in which you'll find peace and joy during those virtual rainy days, whatever the weather ADAM BRYANT



10
GEARS OF WAR 4
It's a little known fact that despite their gruff and macho demeanour the Fenix family is quite fond of the rain and enjoy getting caught in it. So much so that you'll find plenty of instances of rainfall throughout the entire *Gears Of War* franchise. It's the latest offering that seems to provide the best experience, however. Do be aware that you'll have to be fairly patient because in order to get to the section with the rain you'll need to reach the third act of the game. After you've met up with Marcus Fenix, lost him, and gone out to rescue him you'll get to see all the rain you want. Don't worry, your patience will be rewarded. Just watch out for the Juvie Swarm enemies, there's a lot of them.

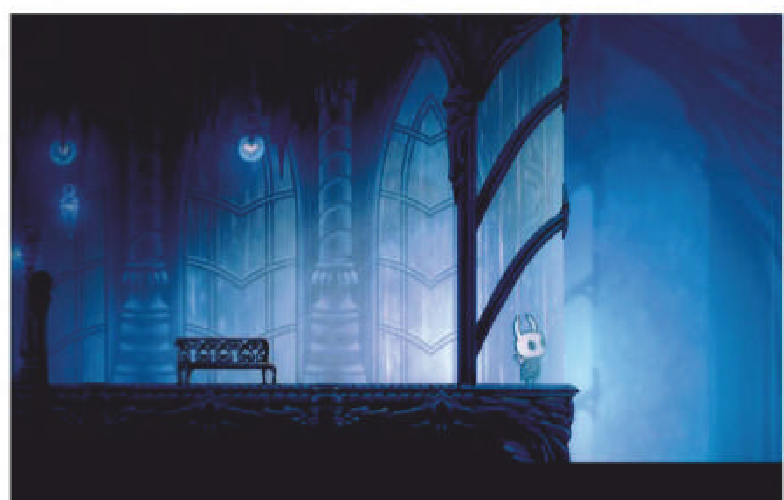




09
FORZA HORIZON 4
For those that both love the rain *and* love to drive, *Forza Horizon 4* offers you an experience like no other. Now, being set in the United Kingdom, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the whole game is just full of rain but you'd be wrong. You start in the autumn, but it's not until you've completed enough challenges and made it all the way to spring where you'll catch the wet stuff. Once you've reached the rainy season you can either race alongside your friends at the height of a downpour or simply park along a country lane during the night time and listen to the patter of rainfall on the roof of your car. No matter how you choose to spend your time you're always guaranteed a treat with this game.

08
OBSERVER
With its visuals heavily inspired by *Blade Runner* (the pluviophiles' obvious film of choice), you can imagine that there would be plenty of rain to see in this game and you'd imagine correctly. As you step out into a dilapidated courtyard just outside a local apartment block you can look up at the skyscrapers that crowd the city, and take it all in. The neon lights and dingy aesthetic only add to the calming atmosphere. Even the pigeons love it. You'll see a congregation of them in that very courtyard. You will have to try and pay no notice to the surreal goings on around you and try not get too scared, though. Thankfully that rainfall should have calmed you down enough that it won't be a problem.





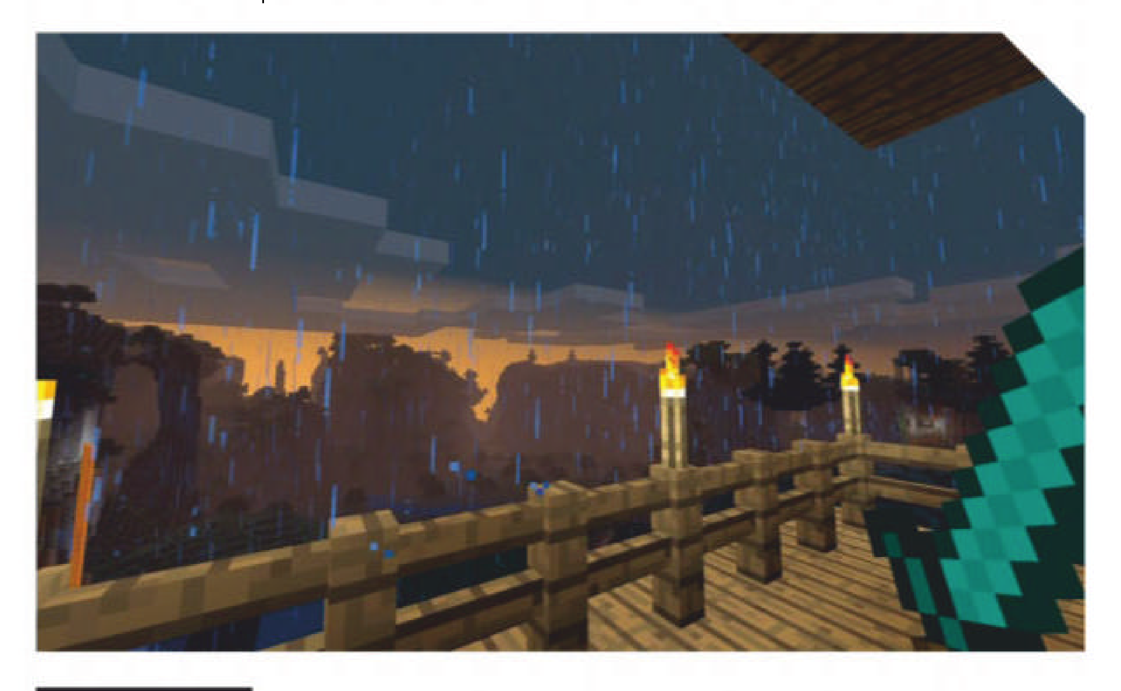
07
HOLLOW KNIGHT
It's not all about the best graphics to give you your pluviophile kicks, as can be proved with the gorgeously hand-drawn delights of *Hollow Knight*. As you travel through the labyrinthine world of Hallownest you'll eventually come across the City of Tears. Thanks to the superb animation of the rain and the audio that accompanies it, this title can offer a better experience than some of the more graphically realistic games. To many this location may seem like a sad and depressing place but to those who adore the sights and sounds of rainfall, this will be heaven. There are even places for you to rest your weary legs as you have a quiet moment of contemplation while watching outside the window as the rain falls. Lovely.



06

MINECRAFT

This is another game that doesn't rely on visuals to make all pluviophiles feel welcome. You'll want to find the right biome first, though. Some generated worlds can be more likely to produce rain than others but once you've found one where it seems to rain regularly, start building your perfect home. We like to build our houses high up with an open balcony to look out onto the rain. Just make sure that you put plenty of light sources around, you don't want any unwanted Creeper guests turning up and spoiling your fun by blowing you and your house up. A great tip is to adjust your audio settings so that the music is turned down and your sound is turned up so as to better hear the rain.



05

SEA OF THIEVES

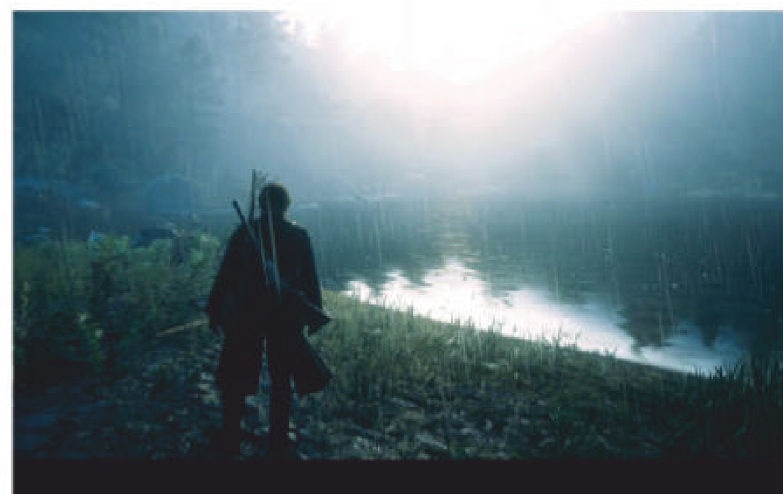
There's plenty to do out on the high seas but a true pluviophile seeks only the sounds of rainfall on a ship's deck. Grab yourself a ship, either on your own in a sloop or with friends in a galleon and head towards those dark clouds on the horizon. Soon enough you'll find yourself inside the heart of a storm but instead of weathering it out, drop your anchor and choose to bask in all that rainy glory. Why not make the moment just that little bit sweeter and pour yourself some grog while you enjoy a rest in your quarters. Just watch out for the lightning bolts and the damage the storm might do to your ship, you don't want your happiness disrupted by an inconvenient sinking.

04

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

The land of Tamriel is beautiful at the best of times but it offers its most during a storm. After a hard day's adventuring, killing bandits, trolls, goblins and Daedra we like to unwind in one of the local towns dotted around the world. As the rain thrashes we'll make our way to a tavern, where we're always made to feel welcome, and park ourselves in front of a roaring fire, wash down our worries with a flagon of mead and simply watch the world go by outside. The sound of the wind and rain rushing by and crashing down fills us with a unique sense of peacefulness. So hang up that bow and quiver, wring out the water from your sopping clothes and kick off your boots – you won't regret it.





03

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

The utter attention to detail and technical wizardry that Rockstar managed to pull off for this cowboy caper is beyond anything we've experienced before. You'll need a little bit of luck on your side, however, because rainfall and storms are random occurrences. Luckily you can set up camp pretty much anywhere in the world and fast-forward the day. Keep doing this until you find yourself in the rain and you'll be mesmerised as to how realistic it looks. Sadly most of these bouts of rain only last a short while, so make the most of them while you can. You've got plenty of options for how to enjoy all that wet stuff but we like riding our horse during a downpour or simply taking a leisurely stroll through it.



02

METAL GEAR SOLID: GROUND ZEROES

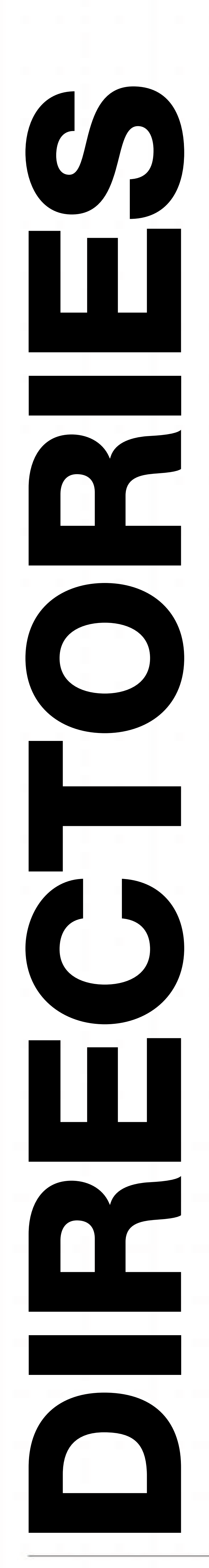
Ah, there's nothing better than infiltrating a black site on an island off the coast of Cuba to get those pluviophile glands flowing. The great thing about this title is that from start to finish you'll find non-stop torrential rainfall. Your main task is to infiltrate Camp Omega in order to rescue your pals Paz and Chico but there's far too much fun to be had running and rolling around in the pouring rain to bother with that. A particularly good spot to soak in the atmosphere is in any of the watch towers scattered around the facility. That way you're out of site from any of the armed guards patrolling the area and you can listen to the raindrops falling on the roof as you contemplate life.

01

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Batman is clearly one of the biggest lovers of rain. Why else would he hang around in Gotham City all the time? Sure, the streets are filled with criminal masterminds that he's committed to removing but the place is pretty much always beset by rainfall. Coincidence? We think not. We discovered that the best experience can be found at the top of Wayne Tower. Take a moment to absorb the sights as rain cascades down across the whole city. Listen to the rain tapping on Batman's cowl and dripping from his cloak and at the height of your zen, leap off the building and glide through the rain. If you time your grappling hook right it's possible to keep yourself gliding until you feel the need to stop.





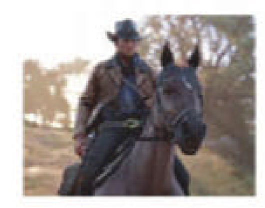


Games, films and television – everything you need for the ultimate Xbox One experience

THE TEN BEST XBOX ONE GAMES

games

01 RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

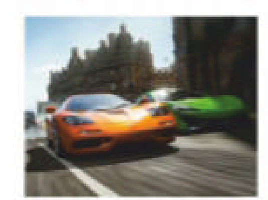


PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES

A stone cold 10/10 classic and the best looking console game there's ever been, with easily the most surprising story in open-world history. Plays best on X, too.

DEFINING MOMENT **That incredible, unforeseen twist halfway through.**

02 FORZA HORIZON 4

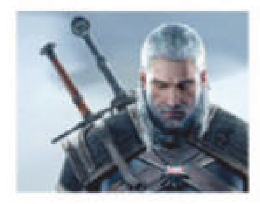


PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS

A must-have experience for every Xbox One owner, not only is the racing excellent and varied, the open world playground you drive across is one of the most stunning places we've seen on the console.

DEFINING MOMENT **Seeing the seasons change for the first time.**

03 THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT

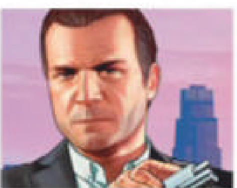


PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO

Hearts Of Stone and *Blood And Wine* have made an already outstanding RPG unmissable. One of the most authentic, entertaining game worlds ever.

DEFINING MOMENT **Geralt in a bath tub. It changed our lives.**

04 GRAND THEFT AUTO V



PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES

Brutal and beautiful in equal measures, *GTA V* is so rich in size, scope and spectacle it's hard to believe it was originally built for Xbox 360.

DEFINING MOMENT **The last heist is a perfect finale to a game that brought so many memorable moments.**

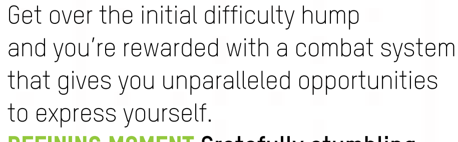
05 ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

PUBLISHER UBISOFT

Bigger and more epic than even *Origins*, this Ancient Greece-set RPG will win your heart whether you play as Kassandra or Alexios in its vibrant, beautiful world.

DEFINING MOMENT **Diving through crystal waters into a submerged Minoan palace.**

06 DARK SOULS III

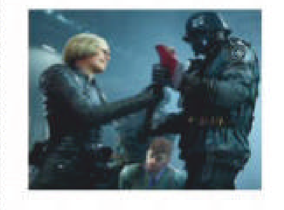


PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO

Get over the initial difficulty hump and you're rewarded with a combat system that gives you unparalleled opportunities to express yourself.

DEFINING MOMENT **Gratefully stumbling across a campfire and realising the worst was yet to come.**

07 WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

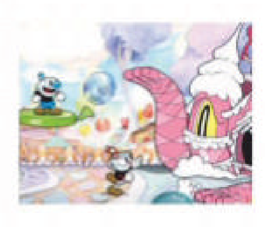


PUBLISHER BETHESDA

Forget realism and dive into a Nazi-controlled America in the 1960s, complete with robots, the KKK and a whole bunch of ridiculous weapons.

DEFINING MOMENT **Taking down an enormous, fire-spewing robo-Nazi.**

08 CUPHEAD

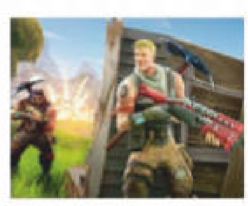


PUBLISHER STUDIO MDHR

A graphically stunning love poem to side-scrolling platformers of old, this boss-focused shooter is a masterpiece of design and difficulty. You will die.

DEFINING MOMENT **Finally beating the goddamn boss you've been fighting for days and crying tears of unbridled joy.**

09 FORTNITE

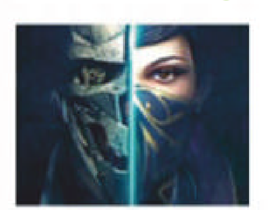


PUBLISHER EPIC GAMES

The biggest game of recent years played by, um, everyone and their grans. *Fortnite*'s Battle Royale is now on Season 6, and it's still technically on Beta. The PvE mode, Save The World is brilliant too.

DEFINING MOMENT **Getting your first Victory Royale, and doing a dance.**

10 DISHONORED 2



PUBLISHER ARKANE STUDIOS

This supernatural stealth-'em-up is a superb action game and a landmark work of videogame world-building wrapped up in a sumptuous art style.

DEFINING MOMENT **Exploring Karnaca's shifting clockwork mansion and finding your way between the walls.**

FOR MORE FILM AND TV REVIEWS, VISIT GAMESRADAR.COM

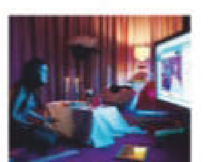
THE BEST FILMS AND TV THIS MONTH

films



CAM GIRL

FOR FANS OF ***The Neon Demon, The Double***

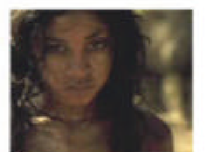


This strange, twisty horror takes us into the world of cyber sex work, as professional cam girl Alice (Madeline Brewer) logs in one day to find an exact replica has replaced her online. A journey into the darkest depths of the internet ensues.

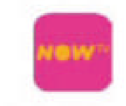


MOWGLI

FOR FANS OF ***The Jungle Book***

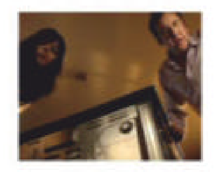


Yes, it's another live-action *Jungle Book* adaptation, this time from the strange mind of Andy Serkis. Serkis presents a grimmer take which, unlike Disney's version, steps away from the talking animals to focus more on the human characters.



MOM AND DAD

FOR FANS OF ***Any Nicolas Cage performance***

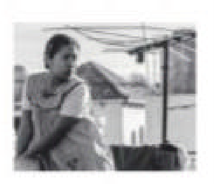


The latest bonkers film starring Nicolas Cage sees him play a father infected with rage and out to kill his kids. Perhaps not the most elegant concept but seeing Cage shrieking while brandishing an axe is too much fun to resist.



ROMA

FOR FANS OF ***Spirit Of The Beehive***

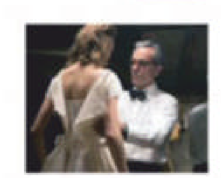


Alfonso Cuaron's beautiful black and white film takes us back to the Mexico City of the 1970s. Shunning the lavish special effects of *Gravity*, *Roma* is an intimate portrayal of a young housekeeper called Cleo and the family she works for.



PHANTOM THREAD

FOR FANS OF ***Atonement, There Will Be Blood***

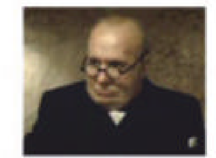


The haunting period romance from Paul Thomas Anderson stars Daniel Day-Lewis as a dressmaker who falls for a waitress and makes her his muse. It's a relationship of obsession and icy control, with Day-Lewis as a master of subtle magnificence.



THE DARKEST HOUR

FOR FANS OF ***The Crown, Dunkirk***



Gary Oldman bagged his first Oscar for playing the famed British leader. Almost unrecognisable under the heavy jowls, Oldman puts in a marvellous performance as the man who helped carry Britain through the Second World War.

tv

WATERSHIP DOWN

FOR FANS OF ***Paddington***



You may have been traumatised watching the original *Watership Down* as a child, but that doesn't mean you should shy away from this Netflix remake. Featuring gorgeous CG animation, it promises to introduce a new generation to the story.



CHILLING ADVENTURES OF SABRINA

FOR FANS OF ***Practical Magic***



If you dying for more *Chilling Adventures* then you're in for a Christmas treat. *A Midwinter's Tale* brings us back to the home of the Spellmans as they prepare for the coven's winter solstice celebrations.



OUTLANDER S4

FOR FANS OF ***Versailles, Game Of Thrones***



The fourth season of *Outlander* picks up with the time-travelling Claire and her 18th century husband Jamie as they try to make a home for themselves in the dangerous landscape of New America. Expect new villains and time shenanigans aplenty.



DYNASTIES

FOR FANS OF ***Planet Earth***



The most breathtaking filmmaking of the year comes courtesy of David Attenborough and the BBC. Each episode looks at a different group of animals, from chimps to Emperor penguins to lions, exploring its family structures and yearly plight for survival.



THE INNOCENT MAN

FOR FANS OF ***Making A Murderer***

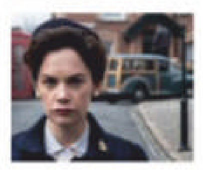


This murky new true crime series delves into the case of Ron Williamson, an Oklahoma man who was accused of murdering a waitress in 1982. Using archival footage, evidence and new interviews, the makers allow us to play amateur detective.



MRS WILSON

FOR FANS OF ***Atonement***



Ruth Wilson writes and stars in this riveting BBC drama about her own grandmother. Alison works at MI6, where she meets and falls for spy Alexander Wilson. When he dies of a heart attack, however, she finds out she wasn't the only Mrs Wilson…

FOR MORE FILM AND TV REVIEWS, VISIT GAMESRADAR.COM

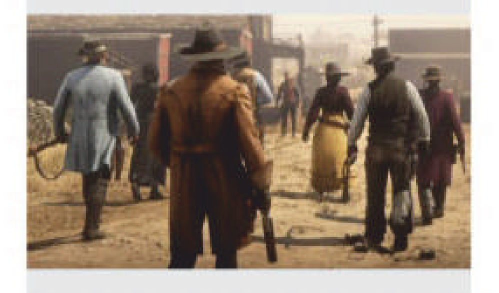
OXM TEAM CHOICE

THE BEST GAMES WE'RE PLAYING AND WHY WE LOVE THEM



Chris' choice
RED DEAD ONLINE

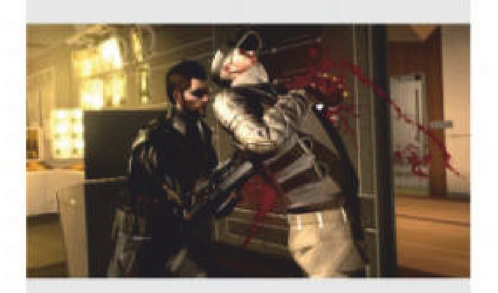
If we thought the main game was ace, we're blown away by being able to ride round the game's huge map posse-ing up, making our own adventures and causing mayhem. *GTA Online* as a Western. So far, it really is that good.





Adam's choice
DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

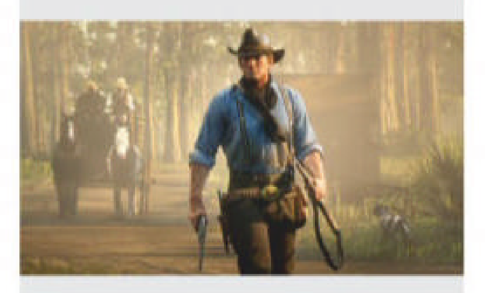
I've got a spot for this cyberpunk spectacle and wanted to return to it with one goal in mind: to get that 'Foxiest of the Hounds' achievement. I have to complete the game without raising a single alarm. Wish me luck..





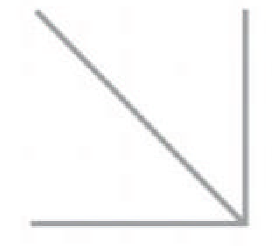
Warren's choice
RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

I'm loving this game more than I thought I would. *Grand Theft Auto* isn't really my jam but going full cowboy in *Red Dead* is so satisfying. I do seem to spend a fair amount of time trying on cowboy boots. That's normal, right?



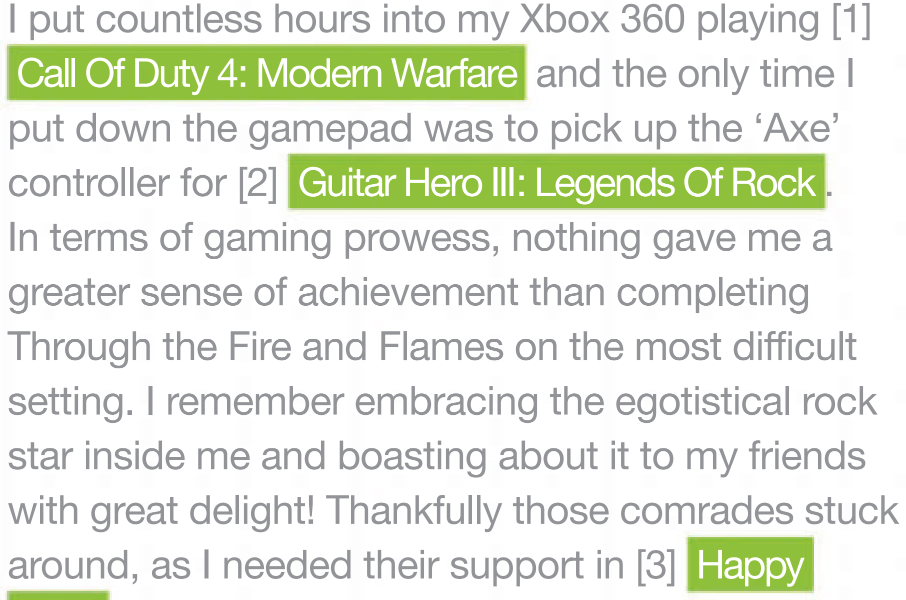
the disc slot

They make the games we love, but what do they play for fun? We ask creatives to pick their faves from Xbox history. This month: Ben Tester



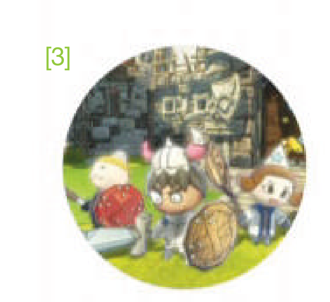


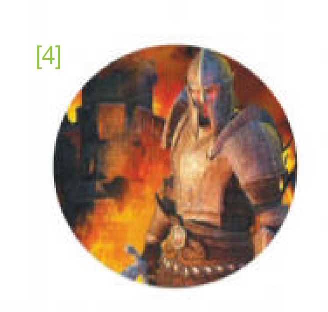
Ben Tester
PR & Communications Manager, Wales Interactive
Ben has been with Wales Interactive for four years and wears many hats. When he's not carrying out PR duties, he's creating environments. Wales Interactive's managing director David Banner was Ben's game art lecturer at university where he studied computer animation.

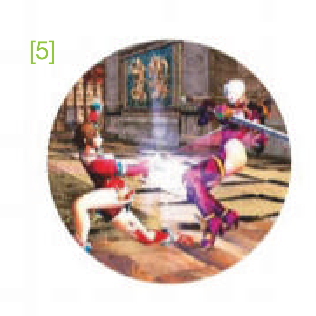


I put countless hours into my Xbox 360 playing [1] Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare and the only time I put down the gamepad was to pick up the 'Axe' controller for [2] Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock. In terms of gaming prowess, nothing gave me a greater sense of achievement than completing Through the Fire and Flames on the most difficult setting. I remember embracing the egotistical rock star inside me and boasting about it to my friends with great delight! Thankfully those comrades stuck around, as I needed their support in [3] Happy Wars which, at the time, I felt was massively underrated. A free-to-play game with a charming design, addictive gameplay and endless amounts of character customisation. I like to think it inspired the *Fortnite* phenomenon we see today. Another highlight of my 360 days was [4] The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. I'm a fan of the fantasy series and *Oblivion* was a huge step up from *Morrowind*. The world was truly immersive and Bethesda gave you the freedom to create any kind of character you like, based on the way that you play the game. Finally, on the original Xbox was [5] SoulCalibur II. Why this over any other in the series? Weapon Master. The Weapon Master mode was a single player story-based adventure mode with plenty of substance. It had a healthy blend of fun challenges, detailed lore and RPG style progression. It would be great to see modern fighting games incorporate this much depth into a story mode.

[2]


[3]


[4]


[5]


[1]


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